

Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 1

Tsuredurebana

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CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

~A Sign-on-the-Line Wedding Story~



Contract.
A debt is taken over.
A loan is allowed.
Don't attend as party.

Ceris. Theris. Fikis
Vivla. Margiea. Euphonia

Author: Tsuredurebana
Illustrator: Rin Hagiwara

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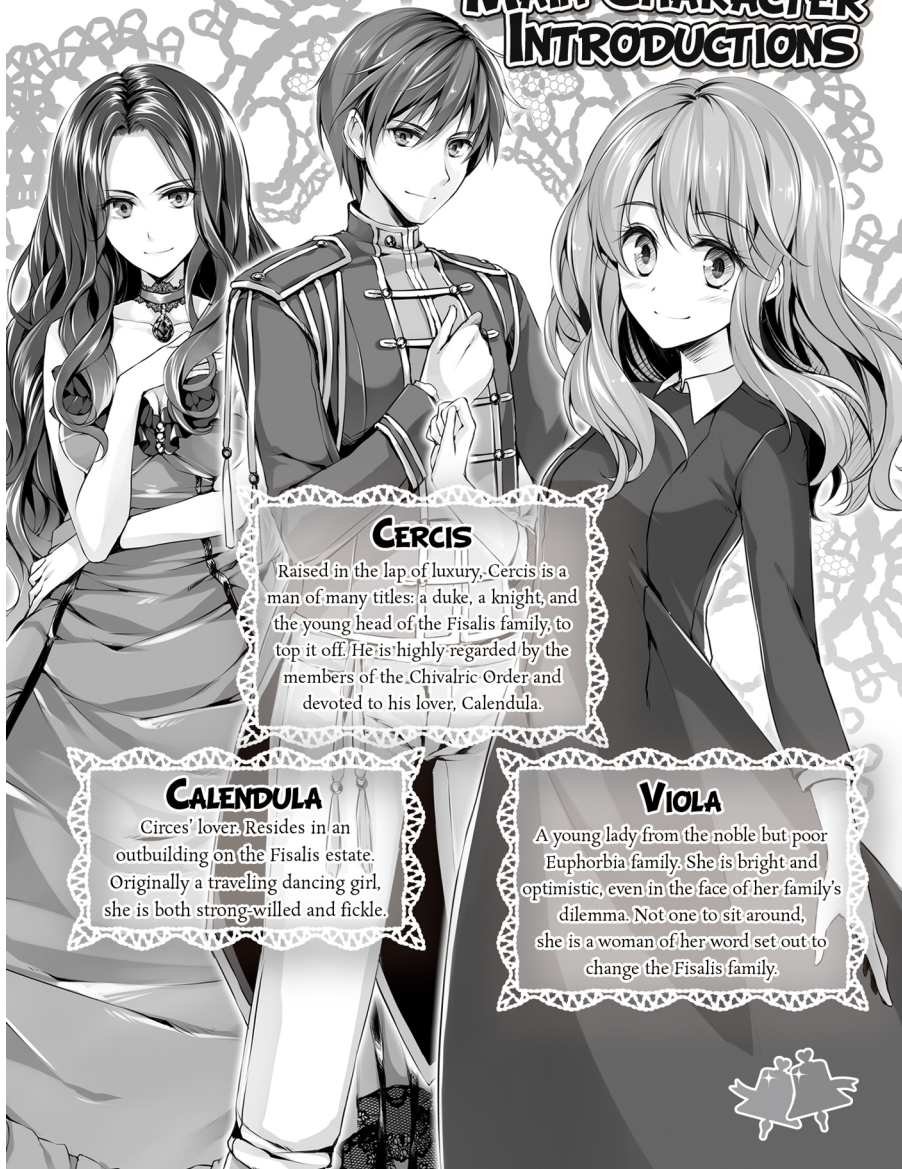
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MAIN CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS



CERCIS

Raised in the lap of luxury, Cercis is a man of many titles: a duke, a knight, and the young head of the Fialis family, to top it off. He is highly regarded by the members of the Chivalric Order and devoted to his lover, Calendula.

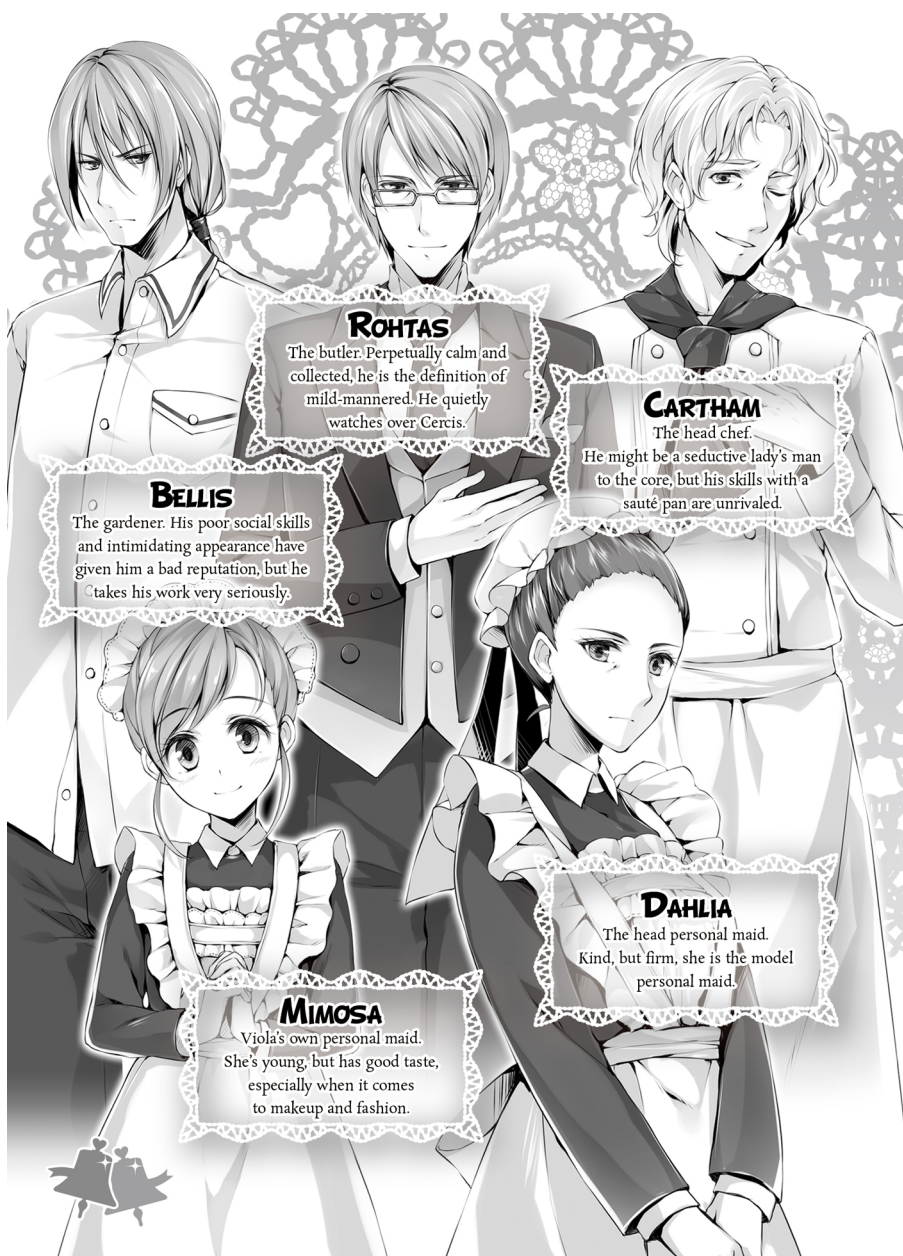
CALENDULA

Circus' lover. Resides in an outbuilding on the Fialis estate. Originally a traveling dancing girl, she is both strong-willed and fickle.

VIOLA

A young lady from the noble but poor Euphorbia family. She is bright and optimistic, even in the face of her family's dilemma. Not one to sit around, she is a woman of her word set out to change the Fialis family.





ROHTAS

The butler. Perpetually calm and collected, he is the definition of mild-mannered. He quietly watches over Cercis.

CARTHAM

The head chef.
He might be a seductive lady's man to the core, but his skills with a sauté pan are unrivaled.

BELLIS

The gardener. His poor social skills and intimidating appearance have given him a bad reputation, but he takes his work very seriously.

DAHLIA

The head personal maid.
Kind, but firm, she is the model personal maid.

MIMOSA

Viola's own personal maid.
She's young, but has good taste, especially when it comes to makeup and fashion.



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1 — Negotiating a Marriage Proposal

The sanctuary bell, known to many as the Bell of Good Tidings, was tolling. Not a single cloud could be seen in the sky that day, giving the impression that even God had given his blessing.

This was the royal capital, Rozhe, of the Flür Kingdom. In mere moments, a wedding was to be held in the sanctuary of a state church that sat on a small hill overlooking the capital. This sanctuary was the holiest place in the entire palace. At that moment, I was standing at the entrance, all but crushed under the weight of the stares from the people in attendance. That was because I was the bride.

Straight down the aisle ahead of me stood the priest upon the altar, and standing across the altar was the handsome bridegroom. The Chivalric Order of the Flür Kingdom stood nearby in full dress uniform, glittering brightly in a way I could really only describe as vain. Was this what it meant to be ‘blessed by God?’ That this man was to become my husband? At best, I’m just a plain, ordinary girl. How sad was it for the bridegroom to be prettier than the bride...

I know what you’re thinking, but this is not just some fleeting fancy of mine. Because, right at that moment, the wedding was actually starting—the wedding of Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis and I, Viola Mangelica Euphorbia!

I was wearing a most magnificent dress that was surely the envy of all who laid eyes on it, and being escorted slowly down the dark crimson runner by my father, Earl Euphorbia, toward Duke Fisalis. The duke smiled indulgently as he held out his hand to me. My father let go, and Cercis took my hand in his. We each had certain expectations about this marriage. Well, isn’t that always the way it goes? Resignation and defiance.



Masking these feelings behind a smile, I gave myself over to the duke. After all, this marriage was one of convenience and left no room for debate.

I, Viola Mangelica Euphorbia, am of noble blood, but the daughter of a penniless earl. That is to say, we were *absolutely* dirt poor. Money was tight, so we had to fix everything ourselves; there was no denying that our once sturdy house was in disrepair. Hoping to ease the burden, we had a little vegetable patch we put together in our modest garden and whatnot... suffice it to say the ways in which we had mastered the art of living cheaply were too many to count. Despite that, though, we were never a family with greedy desires for fame, and we lived modestly according to the motto of ‘honorable poverty.’ We were the picture of simplicity and frugality: no indulging meant no waste. Even when attending social functions, which you could say was a noble’s job, we interacted only as was strictly necessary. Nevertheless, the five of us—my father, my mother, my younger brother and sister, and myself—all lived together happily.

But then, three years ago... our already meager territory was struck by the largest famine in history. Even though we were near the capital, our soil was barren, which in turn meant we never had much in the way of income. Thus, those who lived in our fief scraped by every day with hardly a penny to spare.

And then the famine struck. Father, unable to bear the thought of abandoning his people, decided to take out a large loan to save them.

That loan was the beginning of all my trouble!

With that money, we bought and distributed goods among the people, and, anticipating a rush to support agriculture during the famine, invested in industries (which had been slowly introduced) to encourage growth. In the mountains within our territory grew a plant that, although inedible, could be made into a dye, and from it, our people made arts and crafts through weaving and dyeing. Even the thread used for dyeing was free, made by combing out the cocoons of the various insects that inhabited those mountains. What’s more, those threads were lightweight, excellent at retaining heat, and were considered quite luxurious, so this one little thread offered multiple benefits.

On the one hand, we were able to make use of materials granted to us by Mother Nature, but on the other, we had developed methods for artificial cultivation and breeding of those materials. And so, through trial and error in stabilizing our economy and land, we were able to provide our people with lives just a little easier than their previous ones.

While we managed to stabilize the land, we were far from paying

back the loan we had shouldered. Even more than before, the Euphorbia family was living a modest lifestyle, although still proud in our poverty. We worked and we worked... and that was it. It was like that old song, “You work and you work, and what do you get? Another year older and deeper in debt.” Despite everything, though, my family tried our hardest!

We didn’t have much help in the beginning; we had kept just one butler and one maid, and let the others go. Initially we were going to discharge all of the butlers, but one who had been with us for a very long time told us that serving the Euphorbia family was his life’s work and that he would work for free, so he stayed. The whole family choked back tears of gratitude when they heard this. So, with our staff basically cut down to zero, the maid and I played dual roles: gardener and, occasionally, chef. From the start, more than just having them live with us as normal nobles would do, our servants enjoyed working alongside us, which we certainly did not mind one bit.

And then one day, out of the blue: a marriage proposal from His Grace, Duke Fisalis. That was a year ago.

“His Grace wants to marry... me?” I sputtered at Father, who had called me into his office to share this bizarre news. Utterly flabbergasted, my sapphire eyes opened so wide it felt like they were going to pop out of their sockets. But I was not the only one having trouble processing the situation.

“It seems so. He is well aware of our financial situation, and in exchange for taking over our debt, Cercis would like to marry you.” Putting his elbows on his work desk, Father rested his chin on his interlaced fingers and gazed up at me with a baffled look. He must have been as startled as I was. This was a bolt from the blue if there ever was one. I was reminded of Duke Fisa—wait. I tried desperately to dig up a memory... hmm. Suddenly, I snapped back to my current situation.

“Have we met before, the duke and I?” I wondered aloud, tilting my head. I could not remember ever meeting him. Try as I might to recall what he looked like, I could only picture a vague, dazzling shape in my mind, unable to make out any details.

“You haven’t,” Father replied. “As I’m sure you are aware, we fell on hard times shortly after your debut into high society, so you haven’t gone out to very many evening parties.” Like me, he tilted his head.

Although I debuted, more or less, when I was fifteen, I can count the number of parties I have attended on one hand, since we fell into poverty shortly thereafter. I was never interested in being very social at the parties I *did* attend, either. I usually just ate and drank with my back to the nearest wall. I was not one to flutter around like a glitzy

social butterfly, climbing the social ladder and gossiping about boys. I have ab-so-lute-ly *no* recollection of who was even at those parties!

“Exactly! He wants someone plain and inelegant like me? Me, someone so insignificant that she doesn’t even know who *is* worth talking about? Why? You’ve got to be someone of status if a *duke* wants you...” Mirroring one another, Father and I both crossed our arms. We tried to think of a reason, but nothing came to mind.

“The duke in question is still young at twenty-four years old and serves as a knight at the royal palace. He has even been made a special division commander at this young age. He’s fit, strong, and handsome to boot. In fact, he is such a sight to behold when dressed in his knight’s uniform that the ladies who flock around him all swoon.” (Source: My maid. She was very well-informed.) Alas, seeing as I had no memory of meeting him, these were just rumors and assumptions.

So what would a total catch like that duke want with a connectionless, debt-ridden, destitute, mediocre, plain—darn it, I’m talking to myself again. I can’t avoid reality, though. I guess he’ll come and formally propose, soon. But the more I thought about it, the less it made sense.

“Er, well then... seeing as we have no reason to refuse, I would rather like to accept his offer... what do you say, Viola? If you don’t want to, I’ll tell him no,” Father said, kindly. He looked me straight in the eyes, as if he was reading my mind. I knew Father respected my opinion, but I had no intention of turning down the proposal. It would be *absurd* for a struggling earl’s family to reject a wedding proposal from a duke of such impeccable pedigree. After all, even if I refused the offer, the chances of another suitable candidate coming for a plain, debt-ridden girl like me were slim—not to mention I had started to think that maybe I wouldn’t mind dying a spinster! If marrying him would save my family, shouldn’t I—or rather, the duke and I—be happy to give ourselves away?

“No, I’ll do it, Father,” I told him. “It would be my pleasure to accept if it’s for my family,” I said with a smile and a firm nod.

2 — Finalizing Negotiations

Several days after I replied back in the affirmative to the Fisalis family, the duke himself paid a visit to my home... along with many, many betrothal presents. Finely made, extravagant dresses—the likes of which I'd never even seen from afar—and dazzling jewels. And on top of that, a little bit of everything else, it seemed. Just an endless stream from inside the carriages...

Beyond anxious at the sight of so many goods being brought into our home, one after another, my whole family crowded into the kitchen.

“We could get out of debt simply by selling all of this...”

“Selling?” Viola, how could you say that!?” Mother shot down my whispered idea, a dark expression washing over her smiling face. My brother and sister’s pupils were like pinpricks as they watched these luxuries being paraded before them for the first time. It was in this moment of mutual stupefaction that the duke made his dashing appearance. He was so perfect in his crisp uniform that looking at him was like looking into a ray of light.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Viola. I am *Cercis Tinensis* Fisalis. I am deeply honored that you have accepted my marriage proposal,” he said as he gazed at me with rapt attention. He smiled beautifully throughout the entire introduction. I was utterly dumbfounded, seeing this gorgeous man right in front of me for the first time. I had heard he was hot, but mere rumors did not do the actual extent of his beauty justice. He was taller and more fit than I had imagined. His carefully styled short brown hair was perfectly befitting a knight. His dark brown eyes were the same color as his hair, and they glittered in a way that somehow seemed dignified. He had a straight nose and an expressive mouth curved up into a gentle smile. In short, he was flawless. His whole being was a perfect combination of features. I was scared speechless to have this dazzling gentleman right there in front of me. Mouth agape, I haltingly introduced myself.

“The-the pleasure is all mine, Your Grace. Viola,” I stammered out. Stupefied as I was, even my bow was terribly awkward. *Ahh, what am I doing?*

But the duke’s dark eyes smiled back at me, with no mention of my clumsiness. He took my hand and said, “You are as lovely as they

say.” Turning to my father then, he asked, “Lord Euphorbia, might I have a word with Miss Viola?”

“Oh, erm, certainly! Allow me to set up some chairs for you out in the garden.” Father was grinning and nodding like a bobble-head doll.

“Thank you, sir.” And with that, I headed out to the garden with the duke.

All of a sudden it was just the two of us, out under the afternoon sun in the quaint garden. “I need you to be my show wife,” Cercis declared, with no warning at all.

What? What did this jerk just say?

“A show... wife?” For a moment, I could not believe what I was hearing. I mean, that wasn’t something you say with a smile on your face, right!? ...*Ahem, excuse me.* The sight of the happy little birds gathered in the garden felt the exact opposite of Cercis’ disquieting words.

I have a feeling this will be nothing but trouble.

I asked my question one more time as I forced my mouth into a fake smile.

“Yes, just for show. I actually have a lover I’ve been with for about six years. I’m in love with her, but, regrettably, she’s just a former dancing girl. She has no idea about her lineage, not to mention she is a commoner—she would be rejected by my peers. I can’t marry her.” He was indifferent in the face of my bewilderment.

“Oh...”

“But lately everyone has been pressing me to get married and produce an heir.”

“Oh.”

“But like I said, they wouldn’t approve of a marriage to her. I have no intention of leaving her, though. So that’s why you would be my show wife. We would just *pretend* to be a happy married couple.”

“...oh?” It was such a crazy idea that I could only give the vaguest of answers. You could say that my expectations had shifted somewhat.

To be frank, then... this guy who’s going to marry me is already madly in love with someone. So, I’ll be his legal wife, but also the side-woman.

Heck, I won’t even be the side-woman, probably, seeing as he has already decided for himself that he couldn’t love me. I mean, normally guys are in love with their ‘other woman,’ right? Er, hold on, I’m confused. Then what would that make me... besides his legal spouse? Oh, I’m so lost. Fine!

I understood enough for the time being, even though I was still lost. I knew this was too good to be true. It would be even more crazy if it wasn’t. Weddings between couples who barely know each other and arranged marriages are not uncommon, but usually both families agree on the marriage because there are special interests at stake. No one marries a plain girl with no connections if there is nothing to be

gained and not even a spark. I understood that much.

I organized my spinning thoughts as I stared at the duke's smile, which had grown dark. He, meanwhile, disregarded me and continued speaking. "You are under no obligation to say yes, of course, and I'm also fine with you taking a lover. All of your daily necessities would be covered, and you'd want for nothing," he said with a sweet smile.

To say something as fiendish as that with such an innocent smile! I nearly felt my soul leave my body. This man is the devil incarnate. I stared at him in amazement, mouth agape.

...Get it together, you idiot. Close your mouth.

A regular, spoiled earl's daughter might have lost her temper, but in my case, my feelings were mixed. This wedding proposal was all due to my family's debt, after all. *Father, Mother, and my little siblings would struggle terribly if they had to pay back all of that debt. If I get angry over his requirements and break off the engagement, my family will fall headfirst into financial ruin. Who am I kidding? We've already hit rock bottom. We would be pariahs in the eyes of high society. Naught but a stain on the face of the aristocracy!*

...That sounds kind of impressive, though.

No, no! Focus! Everything will work out as long as I grin and bear it.

I mentioned this in a conversation a few days ago—I've never been in love. Not a single gentleman has ever caught my interest in my eighteen years of living. I never really thought about my future. I simply figured, 'We're too poor for me to get married. I need to be around to help out!' So, really, I should be grateful for the opportunity to live a life of luxury, right? I mean, I wouldn't have to worry about retirement!

All of this flew through my mind in that one moment. "Alright. I'll do anything if you promise to pay off our debt," I answered calmly enough.

I don't think that I'll be looking for a lover or anything, though.

Perhaps it was because I answered him so matter-of-factly, but the duke seemed slightly surprised. His smile, however, soon returned, and he said, "I'm glad you're so agreeable. I'm looking forward to our future together."

He held out his right hand.

Are we 'closing the deal?' I unhesitatingly wrapped my right hand around his.

"Yes, me too... by the way, what would I actually be expected to do as your show wife?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, to start, as duchess, I would have to go to social events, right?"

"Oh, no, I'm so busy that I don't often go to parties. You would not be required to go."

"I don't have to?"

"Correct. If things change, we can discuss it then."

So in other words, socializing is still a possibility. Got it.

"I understand. What about tea parties?"

"Er, my mother is not really one for socializing, so she only goes to and hosts them infrequently."

"I see."

Of course, glitz and glamor aren't appealing to reserved people, you don't have to tell me.

I was relieved to hear that I did not have to be a social butterfly.

"Managing the manor, then... What about that?"

I'll bet it's going to be all up to me to do.

"The butler, Rohtas, takes care of running the house, so you don't need to worry about that. He's been serving us since my parents' generation, so he knows our household better than anyone. If you ever have any questions, do ask Rohtas or the head maid."

"Alright."

He sounds less like the head of the house... and more like a butler himself!

"Well then, what of your territory?" I pressed. The duke was a knight. I was sure he was busy, since he held the important position of division commander, so I was curious as to how he managed his territory. In my family, my father ruled the fiefdom, but my mother helped out where she could. I did not expect him to pass the whole domain off to me, but just in case, I wanted to ask.

"At the moment, my father... the previous generation looks after the territory. When the rank of duke was suddenly passed down to me, I stopped going out around our territory, you see, because I had so much to do. I left the land to them. You are not required to accompany them around the territory, either."

Phew, I thought, nodding along.

Me? Administering a domain? That would be asking for disaster.

And now for the big question. "Where do you stand in terms of producing an heir?"

I am going to be a virgin 'show bride' and I am not going to make an heir with him.

"If I have a child with any of my lovers, it obviously would not be yours to raise, but I would adopt it and make it my successor."

What a brutal answer, even for a man as indifferent as him! He'd rather hire a wetnurse than let me raise the baby.

Hmm... it looks like what we have here is a debt-canceling devil. Is he really going to save my family? When I weigh my options... I'm inclined to lean toward wiping out our debt. I guess if there aren't any guests, you don't have to worry about the upkeep of the house, anyway. On top of

that, he said I don't even have to worry about the territory... I really will be just for show! What am I going to do all day then—just sit around in the manor?

...I guess I'll put off thinking about that until the time comes.

To sum it all up, the duke told me that he had to get married, that all my necessities would be covered if I behaved myself while at the manor, that I could have a lover so long as I was discreet about it, that I didn't have to go out and be social, and that we didn't have to have a baby together.

This is quite a set of terms and conditions. To be fair, they don't negatively impact me all that much personally, so I think I'll be fine. My family's well-being depends on it! Moreover, a reserved person like me is better suited for a life indoors than one out and about!

"Is there anything else you want to know?" Cercis asked, although he had already answered all of my questions.

"I think I am fine for now. If I come up with anything later, I'll ask you then."

"That sounds like a plan."

And thus I formally entered into a marriage of convenience, or rather, a marriage by contract, between the Fisalis and the Euphorbia families.

3 — The Signing, er, Wedding Ceremony

After a shocking completion of negotiations and a yearlong engagement, we were finally married.

The original plan was to hold the ceremony six months after the engagement, but about two months prior to the ceremony, an incident occurred in the country to the south that resulted in a minor conflict at the national border, so the duke was occupied with serving in the armed forces there. The Kingdom of Flür was blessed with warm weather, the flatlands yielded a good harvest, and our mountains produced a wide variety of minerals. Our resources were plentiful and the mood across the country was peaceful.

On the other hand, the country to the south was cursed with a hot, harsh climate that made the soil infertile, so most people sustained themselves by hunting. It seemed that they had set their sights on our calm, fertile soil. If one was to describe this general character of this hot-blooded nation, well... to put it nicely, they were passionate. To put it bluntly, they were easily whipped into a frenzy and were always quarreling with neighboring countries. Thus far, for reasons I can't explain, we generally avoided conflict. This time, however, we were unable to avoid it, and a skirmish broke out. And naturally, when the armed forces were dispatched, so was the duke.

The fighting went on for several months and ended with a tentative victory for the Flür Kingdom. When life both inside and out of the country returned to normal afterwards, we held the wedding.

A whole year had passed since finalizing our contract... er, announcing our engagement by the time the wedding was held. I was on the verge of pummeling this man, whose engagement and face had nearly been erased from my mind. All the while, of course, I had kept the contract a secret from my family. They might have fainted at the sight of the roguish clauses it contained. I was probably the only one capable of enduring its contents.

And so we return to the beginning of my story, the day of the wedding.

Our wedding was held at the head sanctuary, the highest ranking sanctuary within the state church, located within the royal palace. To be allowed to get married in the palace sanctuary is a privilege granted only to royalty and a handful of notable, wealthy people. Rich

brats—I mean... aristocrats—like the duke were at the top of the list of these notable people.

Hmm, once I'm somebody, I'll get special treatment, too!

I wore a glamorous wedding dress provided for me by the duke's family, made of the highest quality silk and liberally studded with beautiful, sparkling jewels. We were quite the pair, me in my dress heavily embellished with dainty, dazzling gems, standing next to the duke who radiated the air of a handsome prince. I felt like a walking treasure chest that day. The dress and jewels alone must have been worth a fortune.

And I, on the other hand, well... not so much. For me to be standing there next to this radiant, handsome duke... there must have been some mistake.

I see you over there. Could you not glare at me, ladies?

They were burning up inside, glaring jealous daggers at me. But somehow, I managed to avoid being stabbed to death by their fury, as I stood there on the altar next to him.

“Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, do you take Viola Mangelica Euphorbia to be your wife, to love until the end of your days?” The priest's solemn yet beautiful voice echoed through the now hushed sanctuary.

“I do,” pledged the duke, his voice strong and unfaltering, his expression humble.

What a liar, I scoffed internally.

Oh no. If I can't give a flawless performance like him, I'm done for!

“Do you, Viola Mangelica Euphorbia, take Cercis Tinensis Fisalis to be your husband, to love until the end of your days?” the priest turned to me and asked.

The duke briefly glanced down at me and I... delivered my line flawlessly!

“I do.”

I put on an excellent performance, albeit with some blushing. I'm quite the capable girl, you know!

The duke nodded in satisfaction, while the priest smiled and did the same. The show was a success.

After we mutually said our vows, there was the ritual of kissing the back of each other's hands. The moment the duke took my gloved hand and reverently kissed it, sighs of awe escaped here and there throughout the congregation—or maybe I was just hallucinating. When I took the duke's masculine hand and kissed it, I swear I heard someone tutting, but that could have been a hallucination, too. Our vows were a pack of lies, and easy ones to see through, at that.

Once the ceremony was over, all that was left was to sign the marriage certificate. For something that could so easily make our marriage official with a simple signature, it was an extremely

daunting piece of paper. Normally, one says their vows in front of the priest and one's beloved, and then signs the certificate which the priest then completes on behalf of the head sanctuary. This goes for weddings at other sanctuaries, too. Wedding certificates are completed by the priests in the head sanctuary, no matter one's rank.

On a related note, suppose one takes the time to pull one's wedding certificate from storage to get a divorce. The priests will be irked because the process for destroying the certificate is very bothersome for them as well—the certificate has to be torn to pieces and burned. Thus, I have heard that the priests will gently try to persuade couples to not get divorced. And since the priests are so stubborn, many people drop their plans for divorce, which is why it rarely happens in our kingdom.

Oh, I went off on a tangent, again. That's why, when it came to the two of us, who seemed likely to divorce, I wonder if I was meant to hear the priests whispering afterwards that "it doesn't matter if people put it away in storage when the contract is simple." I must have been mistaken.

As I mulled over all these things, the duke was beside me signing the certificate, without hesitation, where it was laid out on the table on the altar. Then he passed the feather pen to me. He even had an exaggerated smile plastered on his face. *Excellent performance, bravo.* Please forgive my less than stellar performance, but I could only manage a sardonic smile.

I took the pen from him and signed. The moment I did, the duke and I 'legally' became husband and wife. Deep down, though, it all felt less like a wedding ceremony and more like a very flamboyant execution and signing of a treaty. The reception that followed was sheer agony for me.

If getting our debts repaid was some sort of game, I certainly feel like the loser here.

Yes, I'm sorry. That's right—I should be grateful he even offered.

We moved from the sanctuary to a vast banquet hall—or rather, a reception hall—in the palace for the reception. The magnificent room was decorated with chandeliers positively dripping in crystals. I was dazzled. This was the most luxurious place in the kingdom for entertaining guests, where parties sponsored by the monarchs were thrown.

The duke's family sure went all out, holding the reception in such an awe-inspiring location! They really know how to impress!

The duke and I were sandwiched between the king and the princess, sitting at the very front of the reception hall. We were looking right at everyone. Under normal circumstances, it was a position reserved for a brilliant leader, so I could not help but feel like

I was being put on display.

The king rose and made some congratulatory address, but it was so long that everyone seemed to be falling asleep. While they weren't paying attention, I took a quick look around. Lines of tables were covered in scrumptious-looking food and sweets. *That reminds me—I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. I'm starving. I had better pray that my stomach doesn't growl.* All things considered, there were a great many people in attendance. I had no clue who anyone was, but I'm sure all the nobility was there.

I spotted my family. It looked like seats had been reserved for them, with Father, Mother, and my siblings all at a table. This was the first time my brother and sister had ever been anywhere this fancy, and they looked frozen in fear. *Poor guys.*

Oh, everyone's standing up? They're all getting their food from the buffet and will get up later to chat and dance. The people at the same table as me must be the duke's parents. They're well-suited to lavish surroundings. This is actually my first time meeting them... I had better introduce myself to them later!

"...so let us have a toast to pray for the happiness of our lucky couple!" offered His Majesty with a raise of his glass. At last, my long mental escape from reality as I looked around the room—I mean, his much-appreciated address—was over. And then he announced the beginning of the feast.

During the feast, the duke and I went around and introduced ourselves, as was the custom. I could almost feel the ladies' eyes like daggers piercing me from all directions as I introduced myself with an insincere smile to my peers, superiors, subordinates, and friends from high society until, just like royalty, I politely excused myself. Thankfully, although I was very nervous, I managed to not say, "it is an honor to meet you today, but I have already forgotten your name," or "I do hope we meet again, but I am confident that I will act as if it is our first time!"

Ugh... it feels like I did a lifetime's worth of socializing today. I'm not proud of it, but until today I was practically a recluse!

Just when I wondered if all that internal screaming from this forced socializing had finally worn itself out, the duke, still smiling, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and whispered into my ear. "Are you alright? Have you tired yourself out?"

That's right, in front of *everyone*.

Your face is too close, and please stop kissing my ear! You're being too sappy, it's embarrassing! But then I realized, *Oh, wait... maybe this is the start of a new mission!*

I had to be careful. I was once more dangerously close to dying on the spot. Having barely caught on, I played along and pretended to be

shy, sweetly answering back, "I do believe I'm fine."

He smiled back at me fleetingly. So, yeah, I think we were pretty much on track, right?

"Good," he said with a bright smile I couldn't hold a candle to.

He's really laying it on thick. Blargh. But I suppose to everyone else we look like a sugary sweet, lovesick couple. I can't say that they seem happy for us though, based on how they're glaring at us. Looking back at this production, I did not have a single bite of that delicious-looking food or dessert. It's heartbreaking.

Our little show—our two-man comedy routine, if you will—ended that night. That evening was the first time I set foot in the Fisalis family's house. The duke... well, no, now that he was my husband, it seemed weird to call him "the duke."

What do I call him? He never said... We were overly familiar, despite being a fake couple. And wouldn't it be absurd for a young girl like me to call a duke by his first name? So... "dear," then?...No. That's just as overly familiar. Rejected. Hmm, "Mr. Fisalis" makes me feel more distant from him, but also feels respectful. Yeah, that'll work just fine. And then I veered away from the mental anguish that was deciding to call the duke "Mr. Fisalis."

Anyway, to get back to the story, I had just arrived at the Fisalis house. Mr. Fisalis (formerly known as "the duke") escorted me into the entrance hall where the servants had lined up to welcome us.

The Fisalis family must be loaded! How many servants do they even have? There are so many! My family only has two, a butler and a maid.

"Welcome home, Sir, Madam!" They bowed with such enthusiasm that they made a swishing noise, which in turn made me really feel the poverty I grew up in. And they called me "Madam!" I was utterly frozen in embarrassment.

But these servants were merely everyday figures in the duke's life, so he elegantly ignored them, saying to me, "You'll be living here from now on. I'll show you around." He led me by the hand up the stairs to the second floor. I was shown to the most lovely—and also shockingly large—room. Taking in the spaciousness, I looked around. There was a sofa and a table, as well as a desk for writing. The most impressive piece in the room was the bed.

How many people are meant to sleep in that!? It could fit my whole family at least!

It was also draped in a lovely canopy. Mr. Fisalis reflexively dropped my hand and entered the room. I touched my hand nervously.

The room was mostly white and outfitted with every luxury I could need, but at the same time, understated. Poor as I was, I could not begin to imagine how much it all cost, but I could immediately tell

that it was high quality. Until then, I had only seen such quality in other people's houses that I rarely visited, and I felt the need to pinch myself. I was actually just about to when I stopped myself.

Ah, well, this originally was someone else's house! No sooner had I unsteadily entered the room than Mr. Fisalis looked in from the doorway where he still stood and said, "This is the master bedroom. Please use it as you see fit," with a strained smile.

The master bedroom, huh? Call it what you want, but since we're a fake couple, when you say I can use this room however I want, you really mean that I should think of this as my quarters, don't you? Understanding what he meant, I turned to Mr. Fisalis and nodded.

"Of course. Er, though, where do you stay, Mr. Fisalis?" I wanted to avoid pressing him for details, but not knowing this basic information bothered me.

"I live away from the house, in a cottage at the edge of the garden."

That is to say, "I certainly don't live here," I guess.

This is the first time I've called him "Mr. Fisalis" and he doesn't seem to mind, so I guess I made a good choice.

"Your girlfriend is there, too, then?"

"Yes."

I see... so this 'cottage' is really a loveshack!

...a loveshack! Even saying it to myself makes the room seem colder.

No! This is not the time to be playing the straight man!

"I understand. I'll make sure to keep my distance."

He said nothing. For some reason, his expression was hard to read, even though I meant what I said.

Did I say something wrong?

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No. You just seem so indifferent..."

"Isn't that what this contract calls for?"

"I suppose you're right. Well, then, I'll take my leave."

"Thank you. Have a good night." Again, nothing.

After an all-day ceremony like that, I was beat! When I looked at him, Mr. Fisalis nodded quickly, as if to say, 'meeting adjourned,' once again with that unreadable look on his face.

After Mr. Fisalis left and I was alone, I sat down on the sofa and stretched. It felt like the first time I'd sat in the calm and quiet all day. Since I'd arrived, it was like the exhaustion had been creeping through my whole body, up from my feet. I really had been exhausted all day. I wore the most expensive dress I'd ever had on in my life, got married for the first time (though I suppose most people's marriages are their first ones), and went to a wedding in the royal palace for the first time. It was a day full of firsts. And considering everything, it was no

surprise that I still wasn't used to pretending to be in love with Mr. Fisalis. My face must've looked rather drawn by the end.

I'm still a rookie actress. I hope I don't blow my cover.

As I was sprawling out on the sofa, two maids knocked and entered. I stared in amazement as they looked after my every need, and by the time I realized what was happening, I was bathed and dressed for bed, and encouraged to hop right into the silken sheets. The next day would mark my official start as a show bride.

Oh well, I'll worry about that tomorrow... I decided before I nodded off.

4 — The Start of My Life as Lady of the House!

Whoa, better sheets really do make for better sleep.

My sleep quality was outstanding on the huge bed—the crisp white sheets smelled faintly of soap, giving off a sense of cleanliness, and felt amazing to touch.

Yep, the servants here did a good job! I almost want them to teach me their laundry techniques.

It was tempting to stay in bed, snuggling deeper into the pillows and silky sheets, so I stretched, but then, just as I was about to get out of bed, I realized something with a start. I had no clue what to do after I got dressed. If I was still at my family's house, I'd dress myself, but this wasn't my house—it was the Fisalis'.

Should I just get dressed by myself?

I didn't even know where my clothes were kept.

I can't believe no one has told me yet where my clothes are. This is beyond inconvenient. But I can't just wander down the hall in my nightgown to ask someone.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I looked around, deliberating.

A pleasant knock on the door interrupted my thoughts.

"Are you awake, madam?" a man's voice asked over the knocking. It was not Mr. Fisalis. This man's voice was a little quieter than his.

He must be the butler.

Realizing that it wouldn't do to open the door in nothing but my nightgown, I threw a dress on over top in a panic.

"Yes, I'm awake," I answered back through the door. Just as I did, the door opened and in slipped a middle-aged man along with two women. They were the same two women who had gotten me ready for bed the night before. One was an older lady, and the other was younger, but both had their hair pulled back in perfect coifs and wore navy dresses under white aprons. All three of them were lined up perfectly in the doorway.

"Good morning, Madam," they said in unison, bowing a flawless forty-five degrees.

Someone else might be impressed by how well trained they are, but I don't see what difference it makes.

I had little choice after such a display of manners, so I gave a small nod back and held back the impulse to tell them I was a lousy

Lady.

I greeted them back, "Good morning," eyes slightly cast down. The man introduced himself as Rohtas, the butler.

Just as I thought—he is the butler!

Wishing to confirm that I heard his name right, I replied, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Rohtas," to which Mr. Rohtas raised one elegant eyebrow.

"No, Madam, just 'Rohtas,'" he emphasized.

Informal it is, then.

"Just 'Rohtas,' understood," I meekly corrected myself. He seemed satisfied.

"Starting today, these two will be waiting on you. This is the head maid, Dahlia, and this is the chief of your personal maids, Mimosa." The older one then introduced herself as Dahlia, and the younger as Mimosa.

I suppose you could say I felt like a real elite having two maids assigned just to me.

We had an ordinary housemaid who took care of the housework at my parents' house, but maids like these, who answer to your every beck and call, were a real luxury. Of course, we couldn't afford to hire servants like that, so if you wanted something done, you had to do it yourself! My family did help me with my corset, though.

So, I could get dressed by myself. I bathed myself, too! I could even do my own makeup, too... more or less. I hope you understand what I mean: you're fine as long as your makeup doesn't make you look like a monster. But this was the Fisalis household, so of course the lady of the house had one, two, or even three maids. Everyone knows the aristocratic elite don't do anything for themselves on their own.

"'Dahlia' and 'Mimosa,' right? It's nice to meet you both," I smiled at them.

"While we are far from perfect, Madam, we will do our absolute best to serve you."

"If there is any way we can be of service to you, please do let us know," they both told me with a smile.

Dahlia's hair was pulled back without a single strand out of place and she had upward-turned almond eyes that came off as harsh at first glance. Her smile, however, gently eased their effect, so ultimately she gave off the opposite impression.

Her voice was kind, and she certainly did not seem as severe as first impressions suggested.

Mimosa had impressive, round eyes that suited her young and cute appearance.

To be so young, and yet also a lady's personal maid, she must be very

capable. She looks to be close to my age, so I hope she can be someone I can talk to.

The butler watching over our friendly introductions spoke next. "I oversee everything that goes on in this manor, so if you have any questions at all, please let me know. Dahlia takes care of the housework, so if you need anything in that regard, please ask her," he told me, bowing politely with his hand over his chest.

"Understood," I nodded back.

"Very good, madam. Breakfast has been prepared for you, so, once you are ready, please head to the dining room. Excuse me for a moment," he added with another bow before exiting my room, leaving the maids behind.

"I'd like to get dressed first, but..." I started, but before I could finish, Dahlia responded.

"Of course, right this way. Choose whatever you'd like," she said, quickly opening a different door.

Ohh, I honestly thought that just led to another room. Oops.

What lay inside the door wasn't so much a closet as an entire room of clothing.

I took a look around after the maids ushered me in; judging from appearances, there was everything from underwear to shoes.

The walls were just dresses, dresses, and more dresses.

The best part was that they were lined up by color to form a gradient.

"But, I won't be wearing all this, will I? And I can't wear this... Putting a few in heavy rotation should be enough, right?"

I was speechless.

Overwhelmed, Dahlia gently tapped me on the shoulder. "If you would like, we can choose something to suit you," she told me.

"...please do." It was painfully obvious that I had never had my choice of finely crafted high-end dresses before, so bursting out, "Yeah! Choose for me!" would only have made me look even worse.

It was all so far from what I had considered my normal that I could not keep up with my thoughts. It was dizzying.

After picking a pale blue dress for me, Dahlia and Mimosa helped me put it on. There was nothing important I had to do that day, so they chose what they called everyday wear. This piece of everyday wear was a simple dress and seeing as the styling was up to my discretion, I didn't have to be squeezed like so darn... I mean, I did not put on a corset.

Wearing a corset under a fancy dress was just for social gatherings and parties... because just having that thing on for four to six hours was no different than slowly suffocating myself! You have to cinch the corset tightly so that the bits that need to pop out pop out, and the

bits that need to be tightened are tightened in order to look stylish. In my case, I'm so flat and curveless that nothing outside of or under the dress changes much. *Instead, it's just a lot of wasted effort put into squishing flesh together to give me a waist and cleavage*, I thought to myself, self-deprecatingly.

There I go, off-topic again. My point was, today I would be wearing everyday wear and not formal clothes.

Even so, the dress was made of high quality silk that felt good against my skin, and the tailoring was superb. Dahlia dressed me skillfully, and Mimosa did my hair before applying makeup.

"That reminds me: what does Mr. Fisalis do for breakfast?" I asked Dahlia as I stared at our reflections in the mirror. He had said he lived in the cottage, but I didn't know if he meant that he ate there, too.

"The master does everything in the cottage with his companion."

For a brief moment, Dahlia's gentle face contorted into a terrifying mask-like expression. Her look was so cold that it felt like a blizzard had erupted behind me, but it could have just been my imagination. I shuddered to think that Dahlia normally looked this cold when she was not smiling. I got the same vibes from Mimosa, too. Even mellow Mimosa!

This is terrifying!! Just who is his 'companion!?'

"Er, who exactly is this 'companion?' Did a friend of his or someone come over yesterday?" I asked, spooked by the sudden shift in Mimosa and Dahlia's moods.

"The master's favorite, the one he lives with."

Oh, so you won't say 'lover' or 'girlfriend!?' Can I at least call her his 'mistress?' Wait, no, that'd make Dahlia's voice even harsher.

Mimosa waited next to Dahlia with her eyes half closed. The blizzard sensation radiated from both of them now.

"So, you mean Mr. Fisalis' girlfriend?" I wanted to confirm, just in case.

Dahlia only replied coldly, "I suppose you could call her that."
Eek!

"Well, what is her name, while we are on the subject?"

"She is called Calendula, I believe."

Why the hesitation? Why does your answer sound like you think I have a problem with her?

"D-Dahlia? Mimosa?"

They suddenly realized that they had frightened me with their moods, and frantically blurted out: "Goodness, I'm terribly sorry, Madam!!" and "Please don't worry about a thing, Madam, everything is fine! Ohohoho..." At that, the previous easygoing atmosphere returned, and any uncomfortable feelings were hurriedly glossed over.

Dahlia and Mimosa reacted with extreme displeasure the moment I

brought up Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend. Wait a second, have I gotten myself on the wrong side of Mr. Fisalis, his girlfriend, and the servants?

5 — My Seat at Breakfast

Primped and prepared, I was shown to the dining room by Dahlia and Mimosa.

The room I stepped into was big, bright, and lovely. The wall that faced the garden was made entirely of glass through which bright sunshine streamed into every nook and cranny, bouncing off an unlit chandelier. In the center of the room was a massive table so large it made me want to ask how many people it could fit. In fact, the table was overflowing with so much food, that I wondered exactly how many people I was going to eat with, and if maybe this was a buffet.

In other words, so much for maintaining my weight.

I'm serious, that's how much it was.

Rohtas was waiting ahead of me and pulled out a chair for me. I sat down. The seat in the middle was for the 'master of the house,' so I sat to the left, for now. In front of me, a stunning assortment awaited... Everything looked wonderful, but there was no way one person alone could handle it.

"Um, Rohtas? Just how many people is this supposed to serve?" I enquired to Rohtas, who was standing humbly beside me, as I stared intently at the food.

"Why, just you, Madam. We still did not know your preferences yet, so we prepared a little bit of everything. Is it to your liking?" Rohtas nonchalantly answered with an unmistakable undertone of 'do you have a problem with something?'

But.

Even just considering salads, there was a simple salad of chopped greens, a dressed salad of steamed and mashed root vegetables, a Sinoan-style salad originating in a kingdom called Sinoa, as well as a Rovençal salad from the famous cuisine of the Rovençe region. Four whole kinds of salad on the table. The soup appeared to be potage. For egg dishes, there was an egg fried sunny side up on top of crisp bacon, scrambled eggs, and an omelette flavored with vegetable bouillon. In addition to all of this, there was steamed sausage and simple boiled eggs... and also fruit, yogurt, and the like. Several kinds of bread had been arranged on the table.

All of this is really just for me!?

Not to brag, but at my parents' house, we just had bread and vegetable soup.

Even dinner wasn't this extravagant, so for someone like me who was used to eating simply, suddenly consuming all this luxurious food (and this was just breakfast!) was sure to wreak havoc on my stomach.

"Does Mr. Fisalis eat breakfast like this, with so much lavish food?" I asked with eyes half-closed, all the while still staring at the food without taking a bite.

He'd have to be a competitive eater to fit this much food in that slim frame!

Rohtas hesitatingly answered, "Yes. Although he does not finish everything on his plate. In the Master's case, what he likes to eat changes daily, so we bring out a wide variety for him."

I was floored.

What... he... likes... to... eat... changes... daily!?

And he doesn't clean his plate! What an absolute lap of luxury he lives in.

This guy needs a stern talking to by a certain green giant!

"Oh, is that so? But if that's the case, a lot of this amazing food must get thrown out, right?" I finally managed to say.

"Er, well," Rohtas hesitated. Up until then, he had been very verbose. I had not minded the previous version of him, though.

I decided to speak plainly. "That's just a waste. I can't eat this much food in the morning, so from tomorrow on, just bread, potage, and some salad will be more than enough. The Rovençal salad looks very good, so I'll have that with the bread and potage, today."

"You will not eat the rest later, then, Madam?" Rohtas asked with a look of bafflement.

"How could I possibly eat all of this? I'd like it if anything that is left over from breakfast is reused for lunch and dinner." I divided up the food onto the plates in front of me as I said this. In that moment, I had an idea: a one-plate breakfast! That with milk tea afterwards would be perfect. Fresh juice would just be too much.

Luxury is the enemy, after all! (My family's motto.)

Looking over the single-serving plates I had taken the liberty of assembling, Rohtas, still with a confused look on his face, said, "We cannot do that. Once we clear the plates from breakfast, we will prepare fresh food for lunch and dinner."

I could tell he was confused by the way he spoke, but I was still convinced that throwing out all this food would be wasteful.

The sheer waste in this house made me want to turn into a green monster, myself, but probably not so jolly. They were too reluctant and I was fed up with it.

"Can't I put it in the icebox?" I asked.

"That is not the issue, Madam!"

"Then what is?"

“The peerless Fisalis family would lose face if the lady of the house was eating paltry leftovers!” Rohtas’ face was bright red.

“It isn’t that big of a deal...”

“It is!”

“Well then, if serving food my way is shameful, are you going to make better use of all this?”

“...understood, Madam. I will have the cooks reprepare the food for the servants to eat.”

My persistence finally wore Rohtas down.

Although it hadn’t even happened yet, the fact that the servants would be made to eat my leftovers weighed heavily on my conscience.

I mean, I would eat them instead.

“So then why not serve the food again for lunch then?”

“Eh?”

“This is really too much food for me. Just salad, bread, and an egg dish would be plenty for lunch. Steamed chicken and sausage for the main course, with salad, potage, and bread will be perfectly acceptable for dinner. And in smaller quantities, please.” I had already moved on to considering the menus for later in the day.

It was sad that, even as reheated leftovers, the food here was still much more luxurious than what I had at my parents’ house. Rohtas seemed perturbed at this prospect, too.

“M-Madam...”

“I honestly don’t need food this fancy. Please.”

I might have been plain-looking, but I could pull off killer puppy dog eyes.

Looking up at Rohtas from where I sat, my eyes naturally turned up.

I assumed an expression on the verge of tears, as if to say, “oh, please?”

“Understood.”

Rohtas folded so quickly at my persistent request that I could almost hear a snap. I knew there was no way he could resist my puppy dog eyes.

6 — How the Lady Spends Her Free Time

I confirmed my plans for lunch with Rohtas afterward.

There was nothing I had to do following my after-breakfast tea, or to put it plainly, I had a lot of free time. At my old house, work—cleaning, laundry, garden work—would pile up, so our ‘free time’ wasn’t all that free. But this was the house of the peerless Fisalis family. They had more than enough hands on deck. Or rather, it would be absurd for them to expect the lady of the house to do physical labor.

A true blue-blooded lady would have a clear idea of what to do with her spare time, but unaccustomed to the concept of leisure as I was, even after I’d thought long and hard about it, nothing came to mind.

“Madam?” Dahlia asked, unable to let my groaning and writhing on the sofa in my room as I thought to myself go unnoticed.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Would you like to try some embroidery, Madam?”

I see. That’s the kind of thing ladies who come from money do in their spare time... a refined method for passing time. I hadn’t considered that at all, since I had become an elite so suddenly.

But for me, sewing was...

“Embroidery? I know the basics, but I’m a lot better at mending things.”

Wow, good job. You sound like a seamstress.

Dahlia was silent.

At my parents’ house, you see, not only was embroidery unproductive, but I was up to my neck in clothes that needed mending.

I don’t mean to brag, but I was pretty good, and could do invisible stitching and patchwork.

Oh, Dahlia’s looking at me like I’m pathetic.

No, don’t gently dab at your eyes with your handkerchief!

I told her that there wasn’t anything I couldn’t do.

“Embroidery wasn’t useful to us, so I never devoted much time to it, but I did embroider flowers and birds on my little sister’s clothes.” I embroidered her clothes to make them cuter, since they were just simple hand-me-downs from me. They made my sister so happy, she

looked like an angel... but this wasn't the time to be getting lost in those memories.

And then I took back what I had said, agreeing to give it a shot.

"Ahem, what should I embroider, then?" I asked, giving Dahlia a smile.

Dahlia's mood seemed to improve, and she suggested, "Hmm, shall we start with a pocket square for the master?"

"Oh... my, well, isn't that lovely?"

"It would be even more lovely if you actually meant that."

"Oh ho ho ho..."

Please ignore her sugarcoating of my terrible embroidery.

I might only be a show wife, but if he's wearing my handmade crafts, we'll totally look like a happy couple! Great idea, Dahlia, you live up to your title of head maid!

I was embroidering a handkerchief for Mr. Fisalis, using the embroidery set Mimosa cleverly provided for me. *Stitch, stitch, stitch...*

I was so slow, though.

"Finished..."

I had managed to complete a pocket square within an hour.

"You did very well, Madam!"

Mimosa praised my work, admiring the little handkerchief I made, but something this small was old hat to me, so before I knew it I'd finished it in the blink of an eye.

It's in larger projects, like clothing for my siblings or myself, that my true sewing prowess shows itself.

"You are truly a skilled embroiderer," Dahlia gushed.

Nahhh, this was nothing. Took me no time at all.

I had done the Fisalis family coat of arms, which was a ground cherry, and Mr. Fisalis' initials, C. T. F. I had only sewn the latter in tiny letters on the edge of the pocket square, so it did not take much time at all.

"You certainly finished it quickly!"

"Well, that's because she's so skillful!"

"Indeed. We shall have to try a bolder design next time, won't we? How about a handkerchief covered in coats of arms? Or make a pattern out of his initials?"

"..."

The maids responded to my increased will to create with lukewarm praise. After that, I sewed different designs which ended up taking the whole morning.

I hate how good I am at this!

Following a lunch of reheated breakfast leftovers, as per my instructions, well... I simply had no idea what to do. Move on to lacework?

As I was thinking to myself, *I'm already bored with handicrafts, and now my shoulders are sore*, Rohtas appeared. He asked, "Would you like to write thank-you letters for your wedding presents?" He had jotted down a list of the many presents that had been sent to the Fisalis house.

I can't even remember who sent what.

I'll have to look them over later.

Although I was shocked at the thickness of the list he handed me, I skimmed it over.

Who the heck was this? They sent a bear figurine holding a salmon in its mouth. It didn't really suit the aesthetic of the house, but I had to find somewhere to put it.

Oh, I know! I'll put it in the cottage, like this!

I had a veritable mountain of all sorts of figurines and decorations. And I had to write thank-you notes for all of them!

Personally.

Even so, writing thank-you letters is a wifely duty, so it was up to me to do.

"That's a good idea. It's better to do them sooner, rather than later," I told Rohtas, taking the writing tools and stationery (embellished with the family crest) from him.

I soon regretted saying that, but there was no use crying over spilled milk.

I wrote and wrote with no end in sight, losing track of time as I did the same thing over and over again, feeling as though I could pass out at any moment. I had no idea that we had gotten so many gifts. I guess I should have expected as much, marrying into the Fisalis family.

Even if some of them were... weird.

No, they're not weird, they're just extremely high quality. Forgive me.

We had received something from almost all of the influential people in the kingdom.

It was hard work maintaining proper writing etiquette while also double-checking who sent what, one present at a time. I was used to physical labor, so it wasn't difficult, per se, but I had next to no experience with this sort of desk work—no, mental gymnastics—so it tired me out.

Aside from a short break when Mimosa brought me afternoon tea, I churned out thank-you letters at the desk nonstop.

7 — The Second Request of the Day

I spent the whole afternoon playing greeting card factory for Rohtas, I mean, writing thank-you cards. And in exchange, my arms were cramped and hurting. I was rubbing my arms, overcome by the pointless realization that I'd never sat at a desk that long, when Mimosa all but sprinted over, and began to give me a massage.

Thank you, God.

What a family, though. Based on how much we received, it seems like every noble in the kingdom sent us something.

These true blue bloods don't do anything halfway.

With Mr. Fisalis and his family's prestige so starkly laid out in front of me, the lack of my own stood out all the more. Most girls with good pedigrees have more confidence in themselves, so I'm sure none of them would be interested in someone like me.

I am so sorry! Please don't come after me!

Oops, my writing hand had stopped again.

"Madam? Dinner is ready..." Rohtas gingerly said, extra wary during the moonless night, as he'd let himself into my room at some point. I was facing the other way with a distant look in my eyes.

"Oh, is it that late, already? I'll be right there."

Surprised, I looked out the window, but it was not that dark yet.

I tidied up the top of the desk a little before I hurried over to where Rohtas was waiting by the door.

"Were the leftovers prepared like I asked?"

"Yes, exactly as per your request."

We headed down the hall to the dining room. Rohtas led the way, followed by me, who was, in turn, followed by Dahlia and Mimosa. The servants were wandering around at lunch, but come dinnertime, it appeared as though their work was done, and I hadn't seen anyone for quite a while.

There were only four people in the house, including myself. The hallway was generously lit with lamps, but perhaps because the sun had already set, it felt oddly lonely paired with the darkness outside.

"Thank you for coming to get me, but am I going to eat all alone in that big dining room again?" I asked as we walked.

"Yes. Is something the matter?"

"Er, it's just that it's awfully lonely."

Thinking back to breakfast and lunch made me feel dejected.

Until then, I had always eaten at a comfy, friendly table with my family of five and our two servants, but all of a sudden, I was eating alone! The two servants had worked for us for so long that they were practically family, so they always ate with us. The seven of us didn't make a party out of dinnertime, but it still felt like a warm, comforting meal.

But now I was all alone! Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa were waiting nearby, but just standing there wasn't the same as sharing a meal. I was the only one eating.

"But Master will eat in the cottage..." Rohtas said shyly.

"Oh, I'm fine without him. What about Dahlia and Mimosa?" I hadn't even considered eating with Mr. Fialis.

I hadn't got my hopes up that we'd slowly become like a real couple or a family, or something. That's how I understood things, at that point. So instead, I wanted the people closest to me, who I see all the time.

But Rohtas cut off that train of thought. "Both Dahlia and Mimosa are servants. It would be impossible for them to eat with the mistress."

Rohtas made a fair argument, I suppose. But that didn't mean I intended to give up. "But don't they say that food doesn't taste as good when you eat alone?"

"Our food is always delicious."

"But if you're enjoying yourself while you eat, the deliciousness doubles."

"Our food is delicious from the first bite."

Grrrr.

I didn't know whether to call him a butler or a snippy brat (can you call adults brats?). There was no way to get through to him.

In the meantime, we had arrived at the dining room. I quietly sat down in the chair Rohtas pulled out for me. The food I mentioned wanting that morning was arranged in front of me. It had been replated so that you'd never know it was leftovers, and it looked delicious.

The servants here really are good at their jobs.

The portions were smaller, too, just as I had requested, but there was still bread, soup, and salad, on top of two choices for a main dish, and if I thought that still seemed like a lot, it was just a peasant's way of... no, a *frugal worker's* way of thinking.

"This looks so good! Thank you for listening to my request. Where do the servants eat, anyway? And what do they eat?" I asked out of curiosity. Even though I knew they could never eat at the same table as me, like family, since this wasn't my parents' house.

"Us, Madam?" Rohtas stared blankly at my unexpected question.

"Yes."

“There is a dining room for us to use. We eat our servants’ meals there.”

“Servants’ meals? Oh, what you mentioned this morning.”

“Correct. We eat the meat scraps and left over vegetables that you do not consume,” he explained.

At my house the servants ate from the same menu as us, so to speak (though granted, it was simple fare), but I shouldn’t have been surprised that the servants at the Fisalis house eat from a more frugal, simple selection.

And then, as I sat there with what felt like a carriage-load of food in front of me, I accidentally blurted out, “Well now, that’s kind of charming of you all, somehow!”

Please, hate the sin, not the sinner! I might have grown up poor, but I’m not some ignorant hick!

But Rohtas was a butler, through and through, and in the face of my words, he strongly asserted, “No offense taken! Please enjoy your meal, Madam.”

“But there’s way too much! I’ll get a stomach ache trying to eat it all.”

Rohtas avoided my gaze as I pressured him until I finally wore myself out and fell silent. Viola 0, Rohtas 1.

I cut my losses and started to eat.

Munching.

...

Plates clacking.

...

More munching.

...

Silverware clinking.

It’s too quiet.

By all accounts, this food should taste great, so why doesn’t it!?

“Urgh,” I whimpered.

“Is something the matter, Madam!?”

No sooner had I set my cutlery on the table than torrents of tears started to cascade down my face. Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa dashed over in noisy confusion.

“I’m so lonely! I always used to eat dinner with my family, the five of us, and our servants, all together around the table. It was warm and friendly. But now I’m in a new place and I’m all alone...”

“Madam...”

The three of them were dabbing at their eyes.

“That... that’s why I want to eat with you all,” I begged them through tears.

I think it’s working. I stared directly at Rohtas.

“Even so...”

He was still reluctant.

“We don’t have to eat here—we can all eat together in your dining room instead.”

“But...” Dahlia and Mimosa exchanged glances, indecisive.

One more to go.

“Please...” I pleaded with my arms across my chest as I let huge teardrops fall from my upturned eyes.

Jeez, how many times today will I have to make these puppy eyes? It’s so out of character for me.

The next morning:

I was delighted to have my breakfast with the maids in the servants’ dining room across from the kitchen.

Which reminded me: I hadn’t seen Mr. Fisalis yesterday. Did he always go straight to the cottage when he got home?

Oh well, best to not overthink it. If I hear something I’m not supposed to, I might accidentally breach our contract!

8 — Touring the Manor!

I went so far as to let loose a very out-of-character onslaught of pleading to make the maids let me eat with them. “But we do not have as much as you to eat, Madam...” Dahlia said, feeling ashamed, to which I responded with a huge smile, “Please don’t feel bad, I’m the one who asked for this.”

Onward to the servants’ dining room! I don’t mind if it’s earlier or later, so long as I’m not alone!

Now, I’ll tell you a little about the servants at the Fisalis house.

The butler, Rohtas, was at the top of the totem pole, along with the head maid, head gardener, and head cook. Below the head maid were the personal maids and the common housemaids that tended to the cleaning and laundry.

I was still unclear about this, but, since personal maids were always with their mistress, it was their job to make the beds in the private rooms. The housemaids were in charge of cleaning the rooms.

There were fifteen maids in total. The head maid—Dahlia—and Mimosa served me exclusively, and I believe Mr. Fisalis had six. Of those six, a group of three looked after Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend, Calendula, in the cottage. The servants rotated every other day. The remaining seven were for when guests came by and for the children I guess we’d have (not via me, of course). When the maids weren’t working, they helped the housemaids with the cleaning and laundry.

It would be difficult for all of the servants to eat at once, so they were split into three groups to eat in alternating shifts. The shifts changed daily and were determined by Rohtas and Dahlia.

That’s what I heard from Dahlia.

Even though I didn’t eat what they would consider proper meals, Mr. Fisalis and Calendula did, so the servants’ meals had some pretty stellar ingredients. Things I’d never even seen at my old house. Like, they got luxury meals, too! Even the servants’ meals would wreck my digestion!

My soup was the same as what they served Mr. Fisalis (making food in large batches makes it tastier, right?) so, it was no surprise that it was outstanding. The same goes for the bread.

The salads, too: the tenderest bits might have been eaten beforehand, but what was left was nothing to complain about. And

then today all of us would have scrambled eggs atop sliced bacon.

I'm really gonna enjoy eating this with the maids! Oh, this will be the best! The food will be even more delicious than it already is!

"Good morning, everyone. From now on, please treat me like one of your own. There's no need to worry about me—please just do what you normally do."

After I entered the servants' quarters, I stepped into a spacious servants' dining room beyond the kitchen and introduced myself before I sat down.

"Understood, Madam!" they all responded, standing at attention in a completely *not* normal way.

I guess that was to be expected, though. After all, I had just barged into their resting area right after I'd suddenly become their mistress.

"I'm sorry. I'm ruining your precious relaxation time. Please don't pay any attention to me, and if you can, don't call me 'Madam.'"

Just as I began to feel rather awful, as if I had done something inexcusable, one of Mr. Fisalis' personal maids spoke up and said in a rush, "It's not like that at all! We're glad to have you with us, Madam!"

"She's right! We never thought in our wildest dreams that you would be here, so we're just surprised, is all!"

"We're just still tense from yesterday," the other maids said.

When I looked at the maids, it didn't seem as though any of them thought poorly of me, so I figured they were telling the truth.

They're all so good-natured.

"I'm so glad to hear you say that, thank you. Let's eat, then!"

They all nodded.

I wonder if I'll be able to be more candid with them soon, I thought to myself.

I'd even want my kids to call me Vi, but that conversation's never going to happen, is it?

The maids were all young, so they'd been candid with each other from the start. I knew how to hold a conversation, but they were all still older than me.

I finished breakfast and went back to my room. Nothing to do today, either.

The next thing on my schedule is lunch. How much free time can one person have? And here I finished the thank-you cards yesterday.

"Hmm, what should I do today?"

Am I gonna start lacework today!? I thought to myself, crossing my arms and assuming a tough-guy pose.

"Today I will be giving you a tour of the manor," Dahlia said as she made my tea.

“Oh, I’m so glad! It’s such a wonderful, spacious manor!”

I’m going on a real house tour!? I’m sure my eyes were sparkling in excitement to peek around someone else’s house. *I mean, it’s my house, too, but I have zero self-awareness!*

This splendid manor was shaped like a backwards ‘c’ and was constructed of stone.

Dahlia went on and on about what style this was, and what style that was as she showed me every nook and cranny. This blah blah was built by the blah blah blah master, she explained, but her words were like a magic spell that rendered me utterly bored out of my mind, and I totally ignored everything she said.

I had carefully studied the history of the Fisalis family during my long engagement, but I didn’t study very much of the building’s history due to lack of interest.

Sorry, Dahlia.

The house certainly didn’t seem like it had been built whatever number of generations ago (let’s just say over one hundred years ago). It had been very well looked after. We looked after my old house, but it was still one step away from being a shack due to the lack of money.

Hmm, there’s no comparing them, even.

We were walking down a long corridor.

“The first floor is essentially a public area.”

“Oh, really?”

In the center of the manor was the reception hall, the main dining room, and the salon. They sprawled over the entire first floor. I’m sure in the days of a more lavish owner, there were many events and tea parties held here. *Sorry for wasting all this space*, I mentally apologized to the past owners.

The kitchen and servants’ dining room were in the east wing. The storage rooms and laundry area were in the west wing.

In the entrance area at the center of the house was a stairway that led up to the second floor. You really got the sense the second floor was private as you climbed it.

The second floor contained the master bedroom (my room), and next to it, Mr. Fisalis’ study. On the other side of that lay the room that Mr. Fisalis used to use. There were also a library and guest rooms for people staying over on the second floor. Rohtas’ room was across from the study.

Dahlia explained that the third floor transitioned into servants’ quarters as you walked to the end of the hallway heading toward the wing.

“How do you get to the third floor?”

The main stairway we had used to go to the second floor led to

that floor only.

“At the end of each wing, there are stairs just for the servants to use. You would use those.”

“So you don’t use the stairs we just took from the entrance?”

“You are correct.”

“I see, I see.”

She explained everything in my house from the first to the third floor and everything in between as she led me around.

There was a garden surrounding the manor that was also shaped like a backwards ‘c.’ Descending the stairs that led there, the gardens spread out before my eyes.

There was a fountain in the courtyard which was surrounded by a promenade; nearby, there were flower beds filled with blossoms in full bloom, all vying for attention.

“The garden is huge!” I exclaimed from where I took in the view just outside the courtyard.

The seasonal flowers and trees were overflowing with blossoms, the grass was a lush green... the scene before me was a pleasure to take in.”Yes, it is the jewel of the family.”

Dahlia’s chest swelled in apparent pride.

“It doesn’t even seem like we’re in the middle of the capital. You really feel like the manor is away from it all and that it’s the only thing around.”

The garden, or rather, the manor grounds, were so vast that I couldn’t see the neighboring buildings. I assumed, of course, that the neighbors were also nobles with estates. There was no noise from traffic, either.

“Yes, our head gardener is quite skilled.”

They sure did do a good job! Or rather, I should say that all of the servants, not just the head gardener, are very professional!

The vast, gorgeous manor sparkled from every angle, a testament to the servants’ hard work.

“It has made me so happy, this lovely manor. But I can’t help but feel that someone in it is lonely...”

As I relaxed in my room after being shown around the manor, a sense of isolation descended over me. The house had been beautifully preserved without a single flaw anywhere, but it was so sparkling clean that it didn’t feel lived in. I mean, no one was even living on the second floor until now.

“Ah... is that how you feel, Madam?” Dahlia said, first looking slightly surprised, then casting her eyes downward with a frown.

“Oh! No, I, er, um, it’s very pretty and I can tell everyone worked very hard to keep it beautiful!” I responded in a panic over Dahlia’s sudden transformation.

I was just feeling a little lonely, is all! I swear I wasn't criticizing anyone! I swear!

Dahlia explained as her eyes started to water, "It's the truth, what we said about you being here. We haven't had a mistress in a long time, we were lacking something beautiful in our lives. A house is only a home if someone is living in it, after all. Since the master, to say nothing of a mistress, has been living in the cottage these past few years, we've all been lonely," Dahlia said, with a deep sigh. She was right, a masterless house loses its spirit.

I, at least, will be living here from now on, and although I wouldn't call myself something as ridiculous as the mistress of the house, I hope I can bring some life to this place.

If Dahlia feels like that, I assume the other servants do, too. I won't let Dahlia and the others look so glum!

"It'll be alright! I'll bring this estate back to life!"

"Oh, Madam!"

My firm declaration seemed to dispel the dark cloud over Dahlia. I held her gaze and said briefly, "I'm certain I'll have a wonderful time helping everyone to clean up and decorate."

She then bowed deeply and replied, confused, "...eh? Cleaning...? You're going to... clean, Madam?"

Her earnest smile vanished and her eyes grew wide.

Huh? Did she not follow what I said?

"That's right! The cleaning, laundry, and decorating!"

"Th-That's unheard of..." stammered Dahlia, suddenly confused.

Huh, why? But I want to clean! Or better yet, I want to learn the skills these servants have. Is something wrong with that? I tilted my head in confusion.

"W-Well, alright. Here's what you can do..." Dahlia finally said, abruptly closing her eyes with a look of resignation.

9 — Let the Work Begin!

I wanted to breathe some life back into the manor after Dahlia showed me around. Maybe it was presumptuous of me, but since the head of the house himself told me to do as I pleased, I accepted his invitation and took the liberty of doing just that.

On top of that, given that the servants here are all experts, if I could get them to teach me their housekeeping tricks and tips, I'd have 'marketable skills' to really make a living when the time came to leave.

I wonder if they'd write reference letters for me...

"Are you really going to wear that, Madam?" chided Mimosa as we stood in my room.

"Er, yeah. I mean, it's easy to move around in, and it doesn't matter if I get it dirty."

Mimosa had reluctantly provided me with a servants' uniform, which I currently had draped over my shoulder. It had three-quarter-length sleeves that made it easy to move my arms, and the A-line skirt had a lovely knee-length drape to it that didn't look half bad when I moved. The color was a neat deep blue.

That'll hide the dirt real nicely. The dust will stand out, though.

I hummed a happy little tune as I put it on.

"Something cuter would suit you much better, Madam..." Mimosa had said, when she brought it to me. As much as Mimosa apparently wanted to play dress up with me, I was never interested in fashion, being the plain girl that I was. Although she was reluctant to bring me the dress, she did help me put it on.

"I'm not worried about being cute. This is more than fine."

"It's incredible, though. Even our humble uniform will look stylish if you're wearing it, Madam. You're tall, for one thing, and you have a delicate slim figure. You'd probably like something more prim and sweet than our simple outfits."

The pout from earlier vanished, and Mimosa smiled when she saw me once I was done getting dressed.

I gave her too much credit, though.

The people who wear these outfits didn't actually get to pick them! And the dress was designed to look like this no matter who's wearing it, so even my lanky, scrawny body looks great in it.

Yes, finally something that looks good on my flat chest! No, it looks

even more sleek because I don't have a chest—that's even better! That must be the hidden power of this uniform!

I was talking to myself yet again.

"Oh, thank you," I smiled and thanked Mimosa for the compliment.

I know it's just how she is, but 'sweet'? Really?

The servants were required to tie their hair back to keep it out of the way, but Mimosa said that she'd give me a cuter style as she combed and braided my strawberry blonde hair that reached just below my shoulders.

"Your hair is very easy to comb, with its gentle waves."

"Is it? I don't do anything to take care of it, though. It's a nightmare when it gets frizzy, too."

"It gets easier to manage when you take good care of it. So just leave that part to me! Heheheheh..." As Mimosa said this, her smile in the mirror became a little bit creepy.

After that, I was hard at work at a wide variety of tasks.

First off, I helped out with the cleaning.

Since the Fialis family was wealthy, they had vases and other decorations scattered all over the place. Seeing all these expensive ornaments stuck everywhere, like they were a dime a dozen, made me feel so lightheaded that I had to sit down. These luxurious decorations could only be left under the care of professionals, like the servants—anyone else would be in over their head!

Currently, I was in a room that was primarily made of stone. I was mopping the shiny marble floor.

I found out that the servants were responsible for cleaning the floor of the third story, where they themselves lived. Technically, only cleaning the second and first floors counted as 'work.' It was still a very big house, though, and I got quite the workout.

Now for the main feature of the manor... which was its abundant use of high quality glass.

Glass windows were common across the land, but their price was based on the size of the sheet. Windows made of rather large panes were in every room of the manor, and the window facing the garden in the dining room in particular was one enormous sheet of glass. It was plain as day that it was worth a fortune! It was perfectly transparent, too, which meant it was even more expensive.

It was all for nothing, however, if it was dirty.

Cleaning windows this size was no easy task, though. You had to climb a ladder to get to the part near the ceiling! The servants did everything they could to talk me out of doing just that, so I quietly let it go.

But even I could clean a little flower vase.

So there I was, wiping away at that little vase while the pros cleaned the window next to me. I found a camellia tree in the garden, so I extracted the oil from the skin of its fruits and used that as a polish. Its fruits were yellowish green, bigger than a fist, and tasted bittersweet. You could find them all over the place, but they were also cultivated specifically for their fruit.

As I was wiping away with a cloth, whistling as I went, the housemaids who were cleaning along with me asked, “Madam, may I inquire as to what you’re doing?” I guess they were curious about my polishing method.

“Oh, I’m using the sap from camellia fruit skins as a polish. It removes grime and gives a nice sheen—two birds, one stone!”

I showed them my bowl of polish.

“Oh, I see! It’s not just a polishing or shining powder!” one of them said, surprised. I told her that we didn’t have the extra money around for that sort of thing at my house, but we did have a camellia tree in the yard. There was no reason not to use it.

That, and it was free.

Just a little life hack, there.

“That’s right! Plus, when you use this stuff, it leaves behind a camellia scent, which is nice and refreshing! You can use it when I’m done.”

“I’m sure it will smell great!”

“It sure will! I highly recommend it. And since the skin of the fruit is something you’d usually throw away, this is very economical!”



My little lecture on economics earned me a warm smile.

"I'll give this a try, too."

"Please do."

And so the housemaids and I began to polish together using the camellia sap.

Needless to say, cleaning with camellia sap really took off with the housemaids via word-of-mouth. The fruit skin they'd previously just thrown out was now suddenly showered with attention.

Three cheers for recycling!

The place that had felt so lonely before, filled with nothing but cold vases and statuettes, was now bedecked with flowers. I borrowed a few from among the dozens in the flower beds out in the garden.

That splendid garden was designed by one person and was looked after by several apprentice gardeners and the head gardener: a handsome, but also somehow wolfish man.

He was called Bellis and was tall and burly, with square shoulders and sharp eyes. The way his ash brown hair was tied back gave him such a tough appearance that the first time I saw him, I mistook him for a guard.

Bellis worked out of the greenhouse. It was on the edge of the courtyard, just a short walk from the manor, and grew flowers that were out of season and rare varieties from foreign kingdoms.

"I, er, is it alright if I take some flowers to decorate with?"

"...sure," he replied, looking down at me.

"Th-thank you!"

Getting flowers from Bellis for decorating became a daily ritual, even though I was kind of afraid of him.

Next was the laundry.

From the very first day I arrived at the manor, I was super impressed with their laundry prowess! Mastering their techniques was something I thought about a lot when I contemplated my future here, so I stuck to the housemaids like glue.

The personal maids tossed the dirty sheets to us in the laundry room. The same went for the sheets from the cottage. The linens from the servants' rooms were left in a laundry basket in a corner of the third floor corridor, which was collected later. They did the same thing with their clothes.

Everyone trampled and vigorously massaged the laundry to wash it. I rather enjoyed the soap bubbles!

The maids did not miss even the tiniest speck of dirt. They rubbed the soap thoroughly over dirty spots, carefully removing the stains. The secret to keeping your whites white is this attention to detail!

Once the stains were completely gone, the sheets were wrung out

by two people at a time and then hung outside to dry.

The drying ground was an unused spot between the manor and the grounds, so we did our best not to block the view when we were drying the laundry. It was one of the rare totally private spaces in the now odorless manor. Although it was essentially dead space, it got excellent sunlight, perfect for laying out the wash.

We took the freshly washed sheets from the baskets and used six people to spread them open: one at each of the four corners, and one per long side.

“What do we have to do after this?” I asked Mimosa while I stood by watching five girls spread a sheet. They didn’t need six people for that one.

“We’ll take out the wrinkles.”

“Take them out? Don’t you normally press them once they’re dry?”

By ‘pressing,’ I mean you fill a metal container-like device—it kind of reminds me of a pot—with charcoal to heat it up, and then you slide it over fabric so that the heat and the weight flatten out the creases. You use it when you want to make your sheets completely wrinkle-free, but apparently that’s not how they did it there.

“Pressing sheets can make them stiff, but we want them to feel nice against the skin, so we do things somewhat differently. We do press our tablecloths and napkins, though,” Mimosa explained to me.

Oh, so that’s why.

I watched the housemaids as she explained.

They shouted, “One and! Two and!” as they, all together, began to flap the sheet up and down.

The sheet made a soft but then crisp noise as it was puffed up, then snapped taut to force out the air beneath it.

Woah, it looks like it would be fun to bounce on that! Rolling around and laughing... Even though it was just a fantasy, I could feel my eyes sparkling at the thought.

“That is not a toy, Madam.” Mimosa scolded me with a look of envy from where she stood adjacent to me, as if my thoughts had leaked out of my ears.

“Okaaay. But how does that get rid of the creases?”

“The vigorous up-and-down flapping removes the creases. Unlike using an iron, we don’t press the fabric flat; rather, moving it through the air gets the job done more gently.”

“Ohh, so that’s how it works!”

That way, it had a better feel and texture! This really is a technique worthy of a duke! It sure takes a lot of effort and manpower, though.

I wanted to try flapping... I mean, smoothing the sheet, too.

Synchronizing my breathing with the housemaids’ and flapping

the sheet was quite a challenge, but I had a good time.

That night I slept soundly on sheets that I had de-created myself. They felt all the better for it!

Doing the laundry was tough work, but it was worth it. *I really worked up a good sweat!*

Cooking was next.

The head chef was a middle-aged man named Cartham. He was a cooking master, but there was also something... sophisticated and sexy about him.

Just how old is he? He looked to be past his late thirties.

He was a complete one-eighty from Bellis: a lady's man down to the bone, the physical embodiment of sex appeal.

He gently brushed his characteristic blond hair away from his face as he casually remarked, "Madame, you look breathtaking today!" It wasn't mere flattery, though... he really meant what he said.

He'd say, "*Vous êtes invités à venir dans ma cuisine à tout moment:* You're welcome in my kitchen whenever you'd like!" with a wink whenever I came or left (even though I was certain I'd only get in the way). He was, in general, a good-natured, easy-going man.

I didn't feel right saying anything about the food, considering he was a master chef, so I just consulted him about menus and had him make desserts and pastries.

On the topic of the manor, and in regard to Mr. Fisalis, I ran into Rohtas while on my house tour earlier and heard that "the Master will be away on an urgent business trip for one week starting today."

I know I mentioned earlier that Mr. Fisalis served as a knight. He was a division commander of a special division within the Chivalric Order; I was told that his special division was going on a reconnaissance mission. He was not some military grunt—his was a position that required significant resourcefulness.

I secretly thought that this group seemed somewhat sinister, but let's push that aside for now. His job is essentially confidential, anyway. Only certain families can know about its existence. And even then, only the very basics, like "He's going to ___ for work." So there was no way a 'show wife' like me was going to get any details. He might've told Rohtas, but since Mr. Fisalis doesn't care about me, I just answered Rohtas with an "Alright."

Even though I hadn't a clue what he did for work, Rohtas almost interrogated me about it anyway.

Still, with all that was going on, time flew by in the blink of an eye. And, naturally, not once did I think of Mr. Fisalis.

I'm a cold-hearted bride. Sorry.

The entire week went by in another blink of an eye, too.

I was relaxing in my room after wandering around the manor all

day when Mimosa came in and said, "The Master has returned."

"Oh, he's come home? Where is he?"

What a stupid question.

But since Mr. Fisalis had never come home the whole time I'd been at the manor, I had never had to greet him, so I didn't know what I should do.

"He's at the entrance. He always stops by the entrance for a moment to speak with Rohtas before returning to the cottage,"

Mimosa explained to me without delay.

Well-played, Mimosa, well-played.

"Would it be alright if I welcomed him home?"

"Oh, yes, please do. Let's get you dressed," Dahlia said, turning on her heels toward my dressing room.

"Oh, you're right!"

I was still in my servants' uniform. In the week that I hadn't seen Mr. Fisalis, I had been putting on the servants' uniform when I got up before getting to work. I usually ended up wearing it all day, so I fell into the habit of just putting it on first thing.

Of course there was absolutely no way I could greet him while wearing that.

I hurriedly changed into the simple dress Dahlia brought me. It was the kind you just pulled over your head, so getting dressed was easy as pie. I undid my tied-back hair and quickly put it in a simple up-do before hurrying toward the vestibule.

"Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis," I said as I arrived. Mr. Fisalis was talking with Rohtas. He had clearly just come back from official work, as he was still wearing his uniform.

When I thought really hard about it... well gosh, I hadn't seen him since our wedding day. I actually hadn't seen him in ten days. Things had gotten so busy at the manor that any thought of him had slipped my mind.

Noticing me, he responded, "I'm home. I do hope you have been well. I've been kept away from the cottage for yet another week and would very much like to go back, so I must be going now."

He gave me a smile and quickly turned around, waltzing right out of the vestibule.

What was that he said? Was he talking about his girlfriend? He was, wasn't he? He didn't have to say that!

Uh, whaaaaaat?

Those really are the only words befitting the situation Rohtas and I found ourselves in.

"...that was fast," I remarked.

"Er, well..." Rohtas said back as we watched the door close with a click.

The duke's bluntness was actually rather refreshing! But that left just Rohtas and me, feeling a little bit abandoned.

A feeling I couldn't explain swept over me.

"Were you and Mr. Fisalis talking?" I inquired to Rohtas, trying to dispel the awkwardness.

"I was reporting what had happened while he was absent. He stopped by here after he returned from his work. He did not even come inside. He comes to this entrance hall for daily updates before he goes back to the cottage," he explained helpfully, expecting this pattern would continue.

He's the head of the family, albeit a flawed one, so it makes sense that he's concerned about the manor. I'm glad to know he doesn't intend to let the place fall into disrepair.

But... as for Rohtas reporting to him about what was going on here...

"...You didn't tell him that I was doing all that stuff with the servants, did you?" I asked Rohtas nervously, looking for verification.

"Absolutely not, Madam! I would never speak of what has been happening even under duress!" he vehemently denied.

You mean that you couldn't stop your mistress from dressing up as a servant. Of course, it was my own selfish decision—Rohtas had done nothing wrong.

"Well, keep it a secret from now on, okay?"

"You have my word!"

It was not hard to imagine that Dahlia would make the same promise.

10 — What I Spied in the Garden

The next day, I worked enthusiastically around the manor in uniform as well. I don't mean to brag, but I was starting to become more of a maid myself than an 'elite aristocratic lady.'

But I did it because it was fun!

Then, I went out to the garden with Dahlia to get some fresh flowers for decorations.

We went to the greenhouse to find Bellis and ask what flower would be most suitable, but since he was nowhere to be found, we roamed all around the vast garden until we suddenly stumbled upon a spot we had never been to before.

It was undeniable—the duke's garden was positively sprawling. We were terrified by the thought that we might have gotten lost.

Whenever I would leave for the gardens alone, I felt like it would seriously be a good idea to have someone prepare some emergency food for me, should worst come to worst! It was such a big garden, in fact, that it would be impossible to really see everything in even a week, at best.

In this immense garden, there was a little corner hidden away by a grove of trees, conveniently invisible from the main house.

"Jeez, this place is like stepping into a forest."

"Er, Madam, that's..."

"Huh? What?"

Wondering what Dahlia meant, I pushed aside a bit of thicket, revealing a little pond, on the bank of which was a small but elegant building. The pond had a water wheel and a stream flowing out of it as well. The building appeared to be a villa. You could even call it a little country house.

Nevertheless, it was even more beautiful than the manor, and I was moved to tears.

From the garden, this place just looked like a forest, but apparently all of that was there to hide this little villa. Once you passed through the trees, the area was surprisingly bright with sunlight streaming in from above.

The structure had a wooden deck overhanging the pond, on which were a parasol and some patio furniture.

It was there that I spotted the shape of a person.

Dahlia and I hid behind some low bushes so as not to be seen. I

picked up a leafy branch that had fallen and, using it for cover, stealthily peeked over the bush.

That's Mr. Fisalis, no doubt about it! And the other person is a woman.

"It's like we're spies or something!" I said to Dahlia in an excited whisper.

"Or perhaps a peeping Tom?" she whispered back.

I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear that.

"So, that structure is the cottage, and that woman Miss Calendula?" I quietly asked Dahlia, who now also brandished a branch of her own.

"That's correct."

Like earlier when she had spoken of Mr. Fisalis and Calendula, I felt a chill coming off of Dahlia. She was so terrifying I didn't want to look at her!

The two of us observed Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend, camouflaging our faces with branches. Or rather, I was watching with rapt attention, while Dahlia hated every minute of it.

Mr. Fisalis and Calendula were flirting like lovebirds, completely unaware of us watching them.

"That Calendula is bewitchingly beautiful, isn't she? How does that saying go? Little in the middle but big... everywhere else? I'm totally jealous. Her face is gorgeous, too."

"Goodness, Master has laid his head on her lap!"

"He's just like a dog. A large breed dog, hehehe."

"See how Miss Calendula coddles him? Oh! She's combing his hair now!"

I felt like a reporter covering a breaking news story.

"His *companion* is about four years older than him, so she treats Master something like a little brother," Dahlia quipped offhandedly.

Dahlia seemed to be on a different page than me... just kidding. I totally wanted to know more, so I broke off my observation to turn and look at her.

"Oh, she's his elder then?"

"Yes. If I recall correctly, she just turned twenty-eight."

"I see. So Mr. Fisalis' type is older women."

"Who can say? Before he met her, he saw all kinds of women." Dahlia was letting things slip again.

If he likes older women, then he must think I'm a little kid at six years younger. Not to mention I'm about as far as you can get from her body type. She's in a league all her own! Who knows what kind of women he liked before, but she sure seems like his type now.

I chatted quietly with Dahlia as we watched the two of them from afar.

“He does have dog-like attributes, doesn’t he?”

“Pardon?”

“He comes right back to the person who takes care of him after he goes out,” I thought out loud, the image of a large dog forming in my mind. How fascinating.

“He wasn’t always like that, though...” Dahlia whispered with a far-off look in her eyes.

“Oh, he was different before?”

“Yes. As the only son, he will be responsible for the Fisalis family in the years to come, so from the time he was a small boy, he has studied earnestly under the previous generation. The previous generation was raised just as rigidly, too.”

“So the same old story of growing up an aristocrat, huh?”

“And so by the time he was a young man, everyone expected him to be a reliable successor.”

“Hmm...”

“But since meeting his current companion, he’s become a spineless fool.”

Mr. Fisalis got hit with the stupid stick. Pffft.

I covered my mouth to keep from bursting out in laughter, while pressing Dahlia for more details with my gaze.

“Until then, he had never depended on anyone and had never been spoiled; I suppose, as the head of the family, he had hardened his heart. When he’s with her, though, she treats him not as the heir to the dukedom, but as just Cercis. He came to know the joys of depending on someone else, as people his age normally do, without having to conduct himself so formally. But now he’s drowned in it.”

“Ahh.” I nodded. The part of him that was brutally kept in line rebelled with a vengeance. Cercis the boy (er, the young man?) has lost himself in his elder’s over tolerance!

“Now, if only he would just use his head a bit.”

Dahlia continued on to say that it was unfortunate he lost his sense of self and let himself be pulled under.

So, is that what happened?

“Wasn’t he popular with women in society for his good looks?” I asked.

I mean, look how many jealous women were glaring daggers at me at the wedding.

“Goodness, he did grow up to be very handsome, did he not? After he debuted all the way up until he met *her*, I understand that he did see other girls, in a fashion.”

“So you mean he would have been better off if he hadn’t met her, then.”

“Yes. Then again, no matter which lady it was, they only cared

about his looks and status.”

Ah, Dahlia's face is tight with displeasure yet again.

“That is disappointing, isn't it? It's not uncommon for people to behave like that, but it's not a proper way to act!”

“His companion was once a traveling dancing girl. She tells him all sorts of charming stories. She has been through a lot and has seen many things, so capturing the heart of an inexperienced, naive young man was no hard task.”

Considering the kind of family he comes from, I'm sure he wanted to get to know her inside and out!

Dahlia, I can't believe I just said that.

“And just look at them now,” I said. “He's been like this for a while, huh? How long has it been? Six years? You know, with a bit of experience, he could just as easily fall out of love with her as he fell in.”

“The more that people around them reject their relationship, though, the higher it fans their flame, perhaps.”

“Totally. By all appearances, they seem to be very close, though, so let's leave them alone for now.”

“What!? Do you really want to do that, Madam!?” Dahlia's eyes widened in shock at my indifference.

“It's been like this from the start, and I don't feel any particular way about Mr. Fisalis, either.”

That's the important part.

We didn't become husband and wife because we loved each other—we just signed a contract!

“I knew it... did he get something out of this after all? He still lives with his companion in the cottage, and there's been no sign that he cares about me, his wife, in any particular way. Really, what was I thinking...”

Dahlia knit her brows in frustration when I spoke.

“So, didn't he just want to protect her? If that's the case, don't you think that's a good enough reason?” I said, trying to de-escalate the situation.

“Madam...” Dahlia looked up at me, her eyes flashing.

Hey, no, don't worry!

“Oh, we'll make sure to maintain our image in public, so don't worry, okay? He even told me I don't have to socialize. More importantly, I've had such a good time living with all of you that I don't mind that he's not here,” I said, to try to comfort her.

“I have a feeling you're missing the point, Madam...” Dahlia said with a forced smile.

“It's fine, really! Let's get back to looking for Bellis. Enough dawdling.”

We crouched down to conceal ourselves as we pushed our way through the underbrush away from the cottage.

There was such a huge difference between the Mr. Fisalis I had seen today, and the Mr. Fisalis I knew (completely secondhand)! Could it be that I was attracted to that difference?

11 — Calendula Strikes!

One month passed in the blink of an eye as I spent every day thoroughly enjoying my life as a servant—I mean, as a married woman.

Mr. Fisalis and I were still estranged, but I had become great friends with the servants! You can't say that we weren't each going our own way.

I had gotten an explanation from Rohtas: whenever Mr. Fisalis came home, he first came to the house to talk to Rohtas before going to the cottage; that is to say, he didn't go *straight* to the cottage.

So, for the time being, I decided that I'd meet him and welcome him home everyday.

Or, so I said, anyway.

"Welcome home."

"Thank you. What did you do today?"

"Oh, I embroidered and whatnot." A bald-faced lie.

I actually planted a new garden with the personal maids outside the salon. Embroidery? I haven't done anything pointless like that since my first day here!

"That's nice. I wish you only the best. Well, then."

If there's nothing else to discuss, meeting adjourned!?

Mr. Fisalis' desire to get back to the cottage was written all over his face as he turned and left.

Jeez, even if you told him she was stringing him along, I feel like he'd say, 'what string?'

Oh well... he was still more or less polite to me.

Of course, he always asked what I'd done that day when I came to greet him, but that's all it was: being polite.

I'd never tell him that I'd been heartily enjoying my time here playing servant, so I sugarcoated my reply back to him—I'd been arranging flowers (i.e. changing out the flowers all over the house, which was, of course, part of cleaning) and walking in the garden (i.e. looking for flowers while I was weeding).

He gave my answer a satisfied smile and quickly made his way back to the cottage.

It was just basic conversation, but that was *no problemo* according to our contract.

In today's search for a new flower vase, we found a spot being

used as a storeroom. There was a whole bunch of furniture that wasn't being used at the moment in storage there, not just vases.

I had entrusted Mimosa with finding the vase. Taking a look at what had been in storage, I asked, "Hey, Mimosa. Why is this furniture all in here? It just looks like stuff we could still use." I ran my finger over a table, scooping up dust. Underneath where I had wiped, I could make out a beautiful parquet pattern.

In other words, an antique.

"Yes, Madam. This is furniture we did not use when we redid the salon. I'm told that this is all furniture that a previous lady of the house brought when she was married into the family," Mimosa replied, without ceasing her quest to find a flower vase.

"Oh, wow, I see. It's a pity, though, to hide such nice things away in here, even if we're not using them."

Picking up a nearby cloth, I wiped off the top of the table. My efforts revealed a cute parquet flower pattern all over the whole surface.

"Wow! Look how lovely this is!" I exclaimed.

At the sound of my voice, Mimosa turned around and, looking at my hand, herself exclaimed, "Goodness, you're right! It does have a certain retro feel, doesn't it?" with a smile.

All the other furniture I spotted was the same style as the table... chairs, chests, etc. They were old but lovely, and I fell in love with them immediately.

"I wonder if we couldn't use these again..."

"Huh? Where would we put them?"

"In the salon."

"All right."

The room we were using as the salon was outfitted with matching furniture in subdued dark brown. The previous lady had the tastes of a mother-in-law in her late forties and chose her furniture accordingly, so, while it *was* subdued, it was also total overkill.

It's comfortable enough as it is, but I'd like it to look fresher...

I mean, despite everything, I'm still a teenager, after all.

It'd be a waste to buy new furniture when there's perfectly usable furniture right here, so let's look it over!

I enthusiastically said, "I'm going to go talk to Rohtas and Dahlia!" as I rolled up my sleeves.

"Huh? Wait, Madam!"

Leaving Mimosa in the store room, I went off to find Dahlia and Rohtas.

On my way to Rohtas' office on the second floor, no sooner had I approached the entryway of the house when I heard a woman's voice.

"Oh, you there. Would you fetch Rohtas or Dahlia for me?"

When I looked in, I saw a beautiful woman I had never met before standing there. She gave me a strange feeling, and she had jet black hair and determined ruby red eyes. Excessive sex appeal practically wafted from her languid expression and voluptuous curves.

Good gracious. Who the heck is that? Certainly not an uninvited guest! This is the peerless Fisalis manor, after all. Whenever a guest arrives, Rohtas goes out to meet them. He's the welcome wagon, in other words. And yet, this sexy lady is loitering in the doorway asking me to call the butler or the head maid.

For her to come in without being announced...

She must've snuck in.

I couldn't help giving her a dubious look.

I guess I'll have to call the guys at the gate and tell 'em that they can't be letting people sneak in just because they're pretty ladies.

I was mulling over the best way to respond when the memory of silently watching her flashed into my mind.

Hm.

Huh? Where have I seen her before?

Oh.

"Hey, you. I'm talking to you, you know. Call them, would you? You *do* work here, right? Don't just stand there, get going. You useless girl," she said to me with some irritation, as I stood there absentmindedly. This woman ordering me around was the same one who was being lovey-dovey with Mr. Fisalis the other day—none other than Miss Calendula!



“Y-Yes! Right away!!”

Phew!! Calendula didn't recognize me, so I got away unnoticed! I quickly left the area and went to look for Rohtas and Dahlia, my original goal, with even more determination than before.

Unsociable as usual, Rohtas was hiding in his office, so I was able to get a hold of him right away.

Waiting until I heard a 'yes' in response to my frenzied knocking, I opened the door with a click. The very first thing out of my mouth, without so much as a hello, was, “Miss Calendula is in the vestibule!”

“Mr. Fisalis' companion, you say?” Rohtas, ever composed, responded in a tone of voice that was the total opposite of my sputtering. He pushed the glasses he wore while working up the bridge his nose with his middle finger.

“Yes. She said to call for you or Dahlia.”

“I see. Of course. It would be best if you... were not present, Madam,” he said, giving me a careful look after he gently removed his glasses and put away the papers around him.

“It would? Well, I'm busy redoing a room, so I'll go look for Dahlia, then!”

I mean, we'd have nothing to discuss if I was there, and Rohtas already said I shouldn't go. Most importantly, Rohtas and Dahlia are the ones Calendula wants to see.

A bitter smile returned to my face as I tilted my head.

“...redoing a room? I see.” Once Rohtas understood, I took my leave from where I stood in front of his office.

...but.

Having found Dahlia shortly thereafter, I tried to go back to the storage room where Mimosa was waiting, but no matter which way I went, I'd have to pass by the front door. So I thought I'd just take a little peek at what was happening there while I was nearby.

Calendula and Rohtas were still talking.

I thought I'd just walk by and pretend not to recognize her, but sharp-eyed Rohtas caught sight of us and shot me a look that simply said, “Don't you come over here.”

Instantly sensing what was happening, Dahlia pulled me behind a pillar, allowing us to watch the scene play out between Calendula and Rohtas.

The entryway was dead silent.

What's that? No, I didn't just *happen* to overhear what they said. I was intentionally listening in.

“It's been a month since they got married, and I still haven't introduced myself to his wife.”

“It does seem that way, Miss.”

"I was hoping I could meet her," Calendula continued, trying to sway Rohtas. "Is she around?"

"Unfortunately, the Lady is occupied at the moment."

"Is that so? Well I heard that she was plain and boring with no friends, so she doesn't go out."

"She is modest and sweet, and does not care to be the center of attention like you do."

"You had better believe it. Now, where is she?"

"She is away attending to business at her parents' home."

"Ah, that's too bad. And I had wanted to see just how plain she was, too. Oh, well. I'll try again later."

"Will you?"

Wow! This is quite a war of words! I can feel the electricity in the air!

Calendula came to see me!? Can you hear me now, Calendula? Good! I have nothing to say to you. In other words, this is the mistress showing up at the house uninvited. Are she and Mr. Fisalis having difficulties in their relationship? This must be what they mean by 'love is a battlefield!' Ahh, isn't this exciting? I Can. Not. Wait to see what happens!

Rohtas was acting differently than usual, though.

He usually acts like a mild-mannered and amiable old man, but when faced with Calendula, he turns politely insolent. There's something arrogant about her, though.

I mean, he's always such an expressionless butler. You could practically see sparks flying off the daggers they were glaring at each other!

I got a much closer look at Calendula than I did when I watched her through the bushes at the cottage. She was gorgeous, with passionate, attention-grabbing ruby eyes and black, wavy hair reminiscent of a river undulating through the night.

On top of having a pretty face, her figure was out of this world!

Who could say whether it was pheromones or just plain sex appeal, but those really were the right words to describe her.

You couldn't deny that there was something decadent about her; I suppose you could say she possessed a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Dang, she's well-proportioned and tall, too. About the same height as me, maybe.

She could probably captivate anyone once she started dancing.

I kind of understand how Mr. Fisalis must feel.

"You should be alright now," Rohtas said to Dahlia and I, who were behind the pillar, shortly after Calendula left. His voice was back to its usual gentle tone, and I started to stand up from where I was crouched when I heard it.

"You didn't really know I was back here, did you?" I said, watching the entrance now at full height.

“Indeed, for you appeared to be merely a young maid,” Rohtas replied back with a wry smile.

“Well, everything turned out okay then, huh?”

“I do wonder. She came here as a warning, so meeting you was not actually necessary, Madam.”

“A warning?”

“Yes. I believe the implication was that you are no threat to her position.”

“I’d have to be awfully bold to get in between the two of them, though.”

There’s no way I’m going to try to get in between them!

“...I surmise that she *wants* you to try to intervene, but,” mumbled Rohtas, unusually quiet. His voice was too soft for me to hear what he said next.

“Huh? What was that?”

“Nothing. At any rate, please leave the Master’s companion to me.”

I got the feeling that there was something hidden behind his gentle smile.

“There’s a lot I’m missing here, but okay, I’m on board. Thanks, Rohtas... now, Dahlia, let’s get to redoing that room!”

“...you do not waste any time, do you?” Rohtas and Dahlia replied in unison, sarcasm written across their faces.

Dinner, that night:

The hot topic in the dining room was Calendula’s sudden attack. Information travels fast among the servants, as you might expect.

“Madam, I heard that the Master’s companion marched right into the house today. I hope nothing unpleasant happened,” a personal maid asked me, worried. Rohtas nipped any ‘unpleasantness’ in the bud, though, so, surprisingly, we did actually avoid anything bad happening.

“It was fine. She didn’t seem to recognize me, and Rohtas took care of her for me.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. You must have looked like an innocent young maid in your uniform! Mimosa did a good job!”

Mimosa and the maid across from her high-fived.

No, the fact that I just don’t give off much of a Lady-of-the-House vibe is simply further proof that I’m way more suited to being a handmaid, I smiled bitterly to myself.

“Master’s companion is rather tempestuous, so she would probably be hard on you, Madam.”

“She doesn’t hold her tongue with the Master, either, so their arguments are intense, as well,” Mr. Fisalis’ off-duty personal maids

gossiped with a frown.

Ohh, so he and Miss Calendula fight, do they!? Perhaps they're one of those couples who thinks that the more they fight, the closer they are. More importantly, I shouldn't get involved in a couple's spat, right? Darn it, sidetracked, again.

"Is she hard on everyone?"

The chatter had quickly turned to how bad Mr. Fisalis and Calendula's fights were, so they let me interject.

"No. They ignore us completely."

"Granted, we gossip about them, of course. We serve the Fisalis family, after all, not her!"

"She throws things when she's unhappy. Who does she think cleans up after her!? When she's angry, she still completely ignores us, even when we're right there cleaning."

That Calendula has her personal maids trembling in fear when their mistress remembers some past slight.

I came to understand what a mean temper Miss Calendula had after hearing what the maids had to say and seeing her march into the house. She hadn't formally met me yet, so for now, I'd just tuck this information away in the back of my mind.

12 — The Missed Memo

Although I was temporarily interrupted when Calendula barged in on us, her little scene had been all but wiped from my mind by the time I finished redoing the salon.

The outdated feel of the room had been toned down in favor of a much cuter look, and I'd totally turned it into a much more convincing salon! It was a lot of work, but I couldn't have done it without the servants (who were still putting up with my weird desire to be one of them)!

So today I'll treat them all to my special deluxe chocolate tarts!

So there I was, standing at the kitchen door.

"What do we have here, *Madame*? You look particularly lovely today! I'm so happy you've come to see me."

Following his indulgent remarks, he took my hand in a series of flowy gestures and kissed it. ~mwah~

Oh! You frivolous man! I'm not lovely at all! You said the same thing yesterday. I'll only twist your sweet words, my heart exclaimed, but this ritual was performed every time I came to the kitchen.

The one with my hand in his was Cartham.

I don't mind that he's a lady's man, but doing this every single day is a bit much.

He really is something else, though, to be able to say such sappy words with such a sappy smile without batting an eyelid.

This is a daily occurrence, so I'm gonna have to get used to it.

It seems most of the personal maids and female staff line up to watch him, too, just like me. No one seems to take him seriously, however, and they just let his comments slide.

Cartham doesn't seem to worry about not being taken seriously.

For real, this happens every day!

I've gotten to know everyone, so I don't have any trouble dealing with them, and I've only been at the Fisalis house for a month; I've had no contact with men outside of those on the estate, though, so my immunity to flowery words and gestures has been compromised.

Thus, I was still unable to let his flirting go.

And thus, his flowery words struck me senseless again today. I could do nothing but gape.

For his efforts, Cartham received an astonishing blow to his head. A clean hit! He let out a soundless scream and his body writhed in

pain.

Dahlia was a karate chop master.

“D-Dahlia? What were you thinking? Is he—” I said, standing between them in a panic.

“He’ll be fine. Something like that will not deter him for long, anyway,” Dahlia said bluntly, shooting a cold glance Cartham’s way.

And just as she said, he was back to his usual self in a snap.

“*Ma chérie*, how could you? Am I to believe you *enjoy* assaulting me like that?” Cartham whined at Dahlia, pouting.

...back at it again.

But Dahlia continued on, wearing her usual severe expression.

“The Madam pulled away. Behave yourself!” she said with a glare, look up at him. However, far from flinching under her intense gaze, he said, “*Hngh*, you’re cute when you’re mad~” and went in for a hug, landing a kiss on Dahlia’s cheek.

EEEEYAAAAH~!! I shouldn’t be seeing this! What’s with these two!? Are they...!?

My cheek quivered as I reached the limit of my tolerance for PDA, and as I inched away, Dahlia seemed to come to her senses.

“What do you think you’re doing in front of Madam!” she grilled Cartham, albeit with a blush on her cheeks.

“Sorry about that! Hahaha,” Cartham awkwardly laughed, without seeming the slightest bit remorseful. He ran his hand through his uncommonly blond hair while he gave us a dopey grin.

Hang on a second, though.

Just why is he so sweet on her? Why someone as straight-laced as Dahlia over a younger personal maid?

It’s not really my place to ask, but... now that I think of it...

“Cartham, did you just call Dahlia ‘*ma chérie*?’”

I was stuck on what he had said a little while earlier.

To which Cartham replied smoothly, smiling ear to ear, “Yes, I did. She is my old lady, after all!” ~Wink~

Uh, what?

“Huh? Your ‘old lady?’ Then you mean you two are *married*?”

“...that’s correct, Madam.”

I repeatedly blinked in shock at Dahlia’s seemingly reluctant answer.

Whaaat? How am I only finding this out just now after a month of living here? Seemingly upright Dahlia and... outgoing but pathetic and shallow Cartham.

...I guess opposites attract. I would never have imagined.

Then again, Dahlia only seems so uptight because she’s so overprepared; she’s still perfectly good-looking, even at her age. She must’ve had all the boys chasing her when she was young. Now, she’s got

that 'strong, independent woman' look.

They've got their differences for sure, but when you put them together, they work.

After coming to terms with that shocking factoid by way of the head chef (who was nonetheless a cooking ace), I made my chocolate tarts and handed them out to the servants.

Eventually, the only servant we hadn't given one to yet was the head gardener, Bellis.

Bellis...

I said it all before—he was strikingly handsome, with intense eyes. You could easily imagine him holding a sword instead of a trowel. His ash brown hair was messily tied back and his long fringe fell over those sharp eyes, but did not completely hide them.

Do your job, fringe! Hide those sexy eyes!

He was usually in the greenhouse, so I had been secretly calling him 'The Demon King of the Orangerie' in my head, but I didn't have the guts to say that to his face!

He was quiet and seemed anti-social, but he did magnificent work. It bears repeating how much a thing of beauty the Fisalis garden was; he'd never be able to pull it off if he didn't take pride in his work and genuinely love flowers.

His careful efforts could be found in every last inch of the garden.

So I was certain that Bellis really was a good person... even if he looked like he'd just walked straight out of Hell.

Though I was inclined to think he was a good man, I was still nervous when I had to talk to him.

And today, just as I expected, he was hard at work in our wonderful greenhouse.

His strong, hunched back, the only part of him facing me, gave off a certain masculine, romantic, pathos... no, more of a sense of 'go away, I'm working. Whaddaya want?'

But I couldn't just exclude Bellis because I was afraid of him!

I determinedly called out to him, "Um, hello, Bellis?"

"...How can I help you?" he responded after a moment's pause, still turned away from me. His hands never slowed.

"I, um, baked some chocolate tarts and thought you might want to have one during your break. Eheheh."

You can do it! Smile!

"...put it on that table by you, please." He continued to talk to me without stopping his work or turning around and pointed to a table in the corner of the greenhouse.

"S-sure thing. Sorry for bothering you!"

Unable to bear the awkwardness, I set the plate on the table he had pointed out, and had turned to make my hasty escape, when...

THWUNK

“Bellis, you oaf! Where are your manners!?”

Someone knocked the Demon King—I mean, Bellis—on the head.

I was, as they say, *shook*.

Bellis rubbed his head where he’d been struck.

Demon King Bellis’ assailant was not some brave hero summoned from... somewhere, but only Mimosa.

...goodness. This is a repeat of what just happened!

There was a wooden trowel in Mimosa’s hand.

Hey, Mimosa, how could you just hit the guy like that!?

As I looked at Mimosa in shock, Bellis abruptly stood up.

Uh oh, is the Demon King on the counter attack!? Our brave heroine Mimosa has gotten herself in quite the predicament, but there’s nothing I can do to help! Someone—! Anyone—!

Mimosa, however, showed no sign of fear and held her ground, glaring at Bellis.

Mimosa’s much pluckier than I would expect!

I pretended to report to a made-up audience as I watched the scene unfold.

“Mimosa, that really hurt!” Bellis said in an exasperated tone, one hand on his hip. The look he shot at her (well, shot *down* at her, since she was so much smaller than him) wasn’t so much steely as... soft!? What?

The atmosphere around the two of them started to feel kind of sweet, leaving my brain swarming with questions.

Why did they turn lovey-dovey!? I want answers!

“Madam took time out of her day to make those tarts and bring them to you, and that’s how you treat her?” Mimosa angrily shot back—up—at him.

...Yuuup, total déjà vu.

“I couldn’t help it. You know I’m not good with flattery.” Bellis said with a sigh. This seemed to soothe Mimosa.

“I do. You’ve been like this for so long. Madam, I’m terribly sorry for Bellis’ behavior.” Mimosa said, turning to me with her head hung in shame.

“It’s no problem. Why are you apologizing, Mimosa?”

“I assumed you still didn’t know that Bellis is actually my husband, Madam. He’s had difficulty making friends for a long time and looks scary, so people frequently misunderstand him. He truly is a kind person, though...” Mimosa said, blushing.

She praises him so easily. That’s not really my business, though. I knew it! They’re married! It was déjà vu I was feeling! And, duh, they’re total opposites!

“I see now. I understand where you’re coming from, though. Your

personality doesn't exactly shine through when you're at work. I could tell Bellis was definitely a wonderful man by how magnificently he cares for this garden. It's just that he has those super intense eyes. What did you mean, 'he's been like this for a long time,' though?"

"Bellis and I are childhood friends. He's looked after me ever since I was just a wee thing. There are twelve years between us, so we were like siblings with a large age difference," Mimosa explained.

"Wow, that's a real age gap!" I exclaimed.

Their sweet and simple romance left me brimming with youthful enthusiasm.

Demon Lord-plus-Wolf-Man Bellis and kind, mellow Mimosa. Yup, another couple I never saw coming, what with their different personalities and that age gap!

I asked Rohtas, too, but he, at least, was single. I was expecting him to have an unlikely partner as well, but alas, I was wrong.

13 — We Grew Even Closer

I had just found out, albeit belatedly, that the head housemaid Dahlia and the head cook Cartham, as well as head personal maid Mimosa and head gardener Bellis, were married. With that, any hard feelings I had towards them faded away.

Indeed, I had gotten used to their quirks.

After I had finished discussing the day's menu with Cartham, I looked around the kitchen for a short while. There were several other cooks in there besides Cartham; they appeared to have come from other regions to train under him.

He may be an overly flirtatious middle-aged Casanova, but he was also at the top of his game.

Or at least, that's what I kept telling myself.

Food prep looked like all out war.

Cartham's usual flamboyance disappeared and was replaced by a strict, leader-like attitude. Even the way he handled and cut meat was like an art.

Cartham had three major crunch times every day, so the cooks under his watch were running to and fro endlessly. In the midst of all this, a different person each day was responsible for cooking the servants' meals. Preparing dinner was especially hectic.

Cartham was carefully preparing dinners to be taken to the cottage, and his apprentices were helping out.

I saw all of this happening out of the corner of my eye while I was watching the apprentice in charge of the servants' meals at work.

"Is that the servants' food for today?" I asked, because it looked like one of my favorite foods!

"Yes, Madam. It is an in-house version of a dish from the Lesace region," the young (albeit older than me) apprentice answered cheerfully.

In opposition to the apparent battlefield surrounding Cartham, this area was much more laid back and calm.

"Oh, a regional dish? Are you from Lesace, then?"

"I am."

The Lesace region was located north of the capital, Rozhe.

"It's very far from Rozhe, isn't it?" I asked, imagining a map of the Flür Kingdom.

"Yes. It takes a week by carriage," he answered with a smile,

hands never stopping.

“It must have been quite a long trip! I’ve never been there, of course, and I’ve never had their cuisine, so I’m really looking forward to trying it!”

“Well, I’ve put all of my cooking know-how into this, so I would hope so!” His answer was brimming with confidence—perhaps because it was a dish from his homeland.

“I sure am! Oh, are all you apprentices from different places, then?” I asked, the thought suddenly occurring to me.

“We are. Mr. Cartham is from Rozhe, but there are people here from the Rheine region, the Wahl region, and Rovence,” he responded, hands still moving.

They were from every which way, north and south, from regional cities and towns quite a ways away from Rozhe.

It seemed that, given the size of the Flür Kingdom, even though these regions were within the kingdom’s boundaries, their climates and characteristics were all different.

I had only studied the realm in school and had never actually been to those places, though, so I didn’t know if this was true or not. I had gone occasionally to other territories, but I had spent almost all my life in Rozhe. And since those territories I visited were only a half-day from Rozhe at most, they weren’t exactly ‘long-distance travel.’

“I see—you’ve come from all over the place! I’m sure everyone’s local cuisine is different from what we have here.”

“That’s right. Because the ingredients are different, and then there are unique seasonings to consider.”

I wonder what they’re all like! I’ve never seen it, so I can’t even imagine. But if these people made it all the way here, I’m sure it’s because they really know how to cook their local cuisine!

“...could the apprentices serve us food from their homelands from now on?”

“You mean...?”

He stared blankly in confusion for a moment at my sudden proposal.

“With all these talented people here from all different places, every day could be like a different culinary adventure!”

As I said this, some nearby personal maids who were listening in while helping to plate the food chimed in.

“That sounds interesting!”

“I’m curious about the food in other regions, since I’ve never been to any of them,” they said in unanimous agreement.

The apprentice agreed, too.

“I see, then. Thank you for letting us know.” He seemed to be warming up to the idea.

Cartham whole-heartedly agreed once I talked to him during a free moment.

Starting tomorrow, we'll be sampling cuisine from all over without ever leaving the manor! I can't wait!

"Demon King Bellis! Demon King Bellis!"

"...Madam, please don't make my name into something it's not."

"Whatever do you mean?" I replied, feigning ignorance.

I was finally able to talk casually with the formerly frightening Bellis! Through Mimosa's perspective, I came to realize that he was a nice guy at heart, even though he seemed scary!

Oops, gotta stay on task.

"Have the flower seedlings I asked for arrived yet?"

"Yes. I've already planted them," Bellis responded simply.

"Oh wow, thank you!"

"I'm replacing the flowers in the garden, little by little, so if anything looks wrong or there's something you'd like to add, please tell me."

"You got it!"

I had asked him to redesign the garden. It was still in the style of the previous duchess—which is to say, mother-in-law-ish—and the layout of the flowers was strangely austere.

The garden was on the larger side, as far as gardens go, so I thought bright colors would be suitable, but the old flowers were all muted. That was fine and all, but since this garden was uncommonly large and grand, I imagined some brighter colors would make it a true feast for the eyes. The flowers growing in the grand greenhouse, as well, were chosen because they were large and colorful—most suitable for decorating the manor. So, I talked it over with Bellis.

Bellis had designed and maintained the garden as per the previous madam's preferences, too, but once he understood what I preferred, he readily agreed that changing everything to suit me would not be cheap, so, for that reason, he was working on remodeling the garden a bit at a time.

I'd been so busy scampering around the manor that no one asked anymore if I wanted to work on my embroidery or lace!

...I wonder if they gave up on me ever being a normal lady.

As of late, I've been completely obsessed with weaving. And dyeing, too!

One afternoon:

I had discovered an interesting clump of grass while wandering around the garden.

"This is a common grapevine, no?"

I often spotted these little vines dotted with ultramarine fruit on

my family's land, and I knew that even though the fruit was inedible, you could extract its essence and make dye. You'd never guess it based on the color of the fruit, but this plant made a beautiful pink dye that played an important role in the development of our territory's economy.

"Yes. You know a lot about plants." Bellis quirked his eyebrows. He seemed surprised.

"Oh, we just had a lot of them in my family's territory. We'd dye thread with them and then weave fabric. You could dye all sorts of things with it. Can I have these fruits?"

"Sure. It'll produce more, actually."

I see. So even if you keep picking the fruit, more will grow. It's very economical, no... business-friendly, even.

With Bellis' permission, I picked the grapes and went back to the manor.

"Dahlia, do we have any white cloth?"

"White cloth?" Dahlia cocked her head as she considered my seemingly random question.

"That's right. I picked some grapes and I was thinking of making a dye with them."

"Oh, is that so? Your family's territory was known for dyeing and weaving crafts, no?" She smiled gently.

It's just like her to be well-versed in my territory's economy.

"There are some sheets and tablecloths in the storehouse. Will those do?" she suggested, as if she suddenly remembered they were there.

"Are they old?" I asked.

"No, not terribly. We simply brought out all brand new linens when you joined the family." Dahlia's nonchalant answer startled me.

You mean you got brand new linens just because I was coming here as a new bride? I had become so used to having nothing that the thought kind of made me want to run away.

Pleeease let me recycle those linens so I can redirect this feeling!

"Okay, I'll use those."

"As you wish, Madam."

I boiled the grapes in the kitchen. I had found other things to make dye from besides those, so I brought a decent supply with me. Recycling the linens would be fun—I'd embroider the dyed fabric to really make it pop!

Mimosa and a few maids who were on break looked in on me with interest as I worked.

Just when the color started to come out of the fruits, turning the boiling water a rich hue, I added the mordant and put the fabric in. I let it boil a while longer, then removed the fabric and dropped it in

cold water... well, look at that.

The fabric had taken on a light hue.

“Goodness, it came out such a pretty color!” Mimosa said, eyeing the freshly-dyed fabric with admiration.

“Isn’t it? The color will turn out differently depending on the fabric, though. I think the color of these sheets came out nice.”

“You’re so knowledgeable, Madam!”

Having never witnessed the dyeing process before, the maids were spreading out the cloths in surprise. I explained that my home territory’s local specialty was dyed and woven goods, so I had experience assisting the process. That seemed to satisfy them.

I thought back to how, back then, we were frantic to revive our territory’s economy, so I had helped Mother when she took the initiative to research and experiment with dyeing.

I gazed at a spot on the wall as I reminisced.

With the help of the maids who had seen my demonstration, we dyed many pieces of fabric a variety of colors.

“Hmm, since I went to all the trouble of doing this, maybe I should make a *Fisalis* family crest.”

Red, yellow, green, orange—I arranged a design in front of me using a rainbow of dyed fabrics. With all these materials spread out before me, I deliberated over what to make.

The *Fisalis* family crest was a ground cherry.

Ah, even though it’s called a cherry, it’s a flower, right? I thought to myself. The flower is actually rather plain, though, so maybe it’s not suitable for a statement piece like that.

Now that I think of it, I embroidered a handkerchief the other day during some free time. Yeah, that will do.

The maids agreed with a smile that I could definitely make something cute out of it.

I made up my mind to go with that idea and started to cut the fabric. I was going to start with some throw pillows first.

“Are you going to put this in the salon?” Mimosa asked as she watched my needle move busily through the fabric.

“Do you think I should? I was thinking of putting it in my room.”

Everyone has their own tastes, so I thought I’d put it somewhere private in case my work wasn’t well-received.

“I’m certain no one would mind if it was in the salon. Besides, it already looks so cute in there, so I’m sure it will fit in.”

We had just finished redecorating the salon a few days earlier, having restored the furniture from my mother-in-law’s trousseau in storage and put it on display.

The new neutral palette gave the room a nice feeling. Considering the style of the furniture and its dainty floral parquetry, it would go

nicely with hand-sewn fabric.

Imagining where I would put cushions in the salon, the maid's comment put me in a good mood.

"That does sound like a good idea! Let's put it in there."

And so we shamelessly decided to put them in the salon.

Since they'll be in a conspicuous spot, I'll really have to take my time making them!

"Let's put them in Madam's room, the parlor, and the guest rooms as well."

Stitch, stitch, stitch.

"Oh, yes, I agree!"

Snippity snip.

We were still working on my much-anticipated sewing project. Since working in silence is no fun, we all chatted to amuse ourselves while we stitched and cut.

"What about the room the Master used to use?"

"I don't see why not. He never seemed like he cared for cute pastimes like this. This would help bring some life to that drab room of his. And besides, who knows if he'll even use that room again."

"That's true."

"Well, what about the cottage, then?"

"What? There? They don't need any. Even if we put some out, I'm sure they wouldn't notice."

"They do have some!"

"Yeah, Master's companion doesn't seem like someone who'd care for that kind of delicate stuff."

"I get the feeling she only cares about decorating herself."

"Same here."

"She hasn't shown any interest in us, either. Granted, we're not interested in her, aside from gossip."

"We can still get our work done since she hasn't outright hurt us, but that would all change the moment she complained."

"Yeahhh." They all agreed.

Then silence.

They say three women make a market, but right then there were six of us and no one was making a peep. The servants moved their lips with even more skill and precision than I moved my needle. Although the conversation had started with where to put the throw pillows, it soon turned to the cottage, but Mr. Fisalis' companion was the new topic.

Ugh, why?

I hesitated to try to add something positive to the conversation, just staying silent and listening. Mimosa had a forced smile on her face, as if she was facing the same conundrum.

I had sensed it a bit before—that Calendula didn't think very highly of the servants.

Could it be because she was the witch responsible for seducing Mr. Fisalis? Should I play the heroine and be like, "How dare you seduce Mr. Fisalis! Give us that magnificent man back!" or something?

Just as I thought how nice it was that we had grown close enough that the servants let me hear their complaints, I realized that two whole months had passed since I had come to the manor.

14 — A Rainy Day

It had been raining for a long time.

Here in the capital, Rozhe, there are two times a year when it rains for about a month on end. This was the first rainy season since I had come to the duke's house.

Rainy days usually meant free time. We were limited to cleaning and doing the laundry, and when there was so little to do, the servants got it done quickly. That didn't leave me any tasks to steal from them!

After I had a nice breakfast with the personal maids, I found myself squirming restlessly on the comfy sofa in my room.

This, too, was a first since arriving there.

"Argh, too much spare time! But I don't wanna embroiderrr. And lacework is out of the question. My body feels so heavyyyy. And I can't dye anything because I couldn't hang it out to dryyy."

"Madam..."

Dahlia and Mimosa were watching over me in mild disgust as I lay there fussing.

But there was just no work to be done.

For someone like me who was usually running around not just the manor but also the vast garden every single day, passing the time elegantly like a proper lady, holed up in my room, was akin to torture! *I mean, I could always read... I like reading, right?* But having to spend the whole day, or even several days, doing only that was just not for me. I'd go mad.

I like reading, but I like actual activity, too, I told myself. I've always kept a good balance between quiet time and work!

There was a faint knock on my door as I continued to squirm on the sofa; Rohtas entered.

"If you do not know what to do with your spare time, Madam, may I suggest a dance lesson?" he said with a smile.

"Dancing?"

I stared blankly back at him, surprised by his suggestion. I had never even considered dance lessons. How did he come up with that?

"Indeed. Dancing will get your body moving, and when push comes to shove, it would not hurt to know how."

"...push is never going to come to shove with me."

I mean, since coming here, I'm still exempt from social activities, right? And I'm not planning on attending any functions where I'd have to dance.

I looked up at Rohtas reprovingly.

“That may be true, but you still ought to learn how, shouldn’t you?” Rohtas continued to pressure me with a grin.

His smile was somehow both kind and coercive.

Am I the only one who gets the feeling I can’t say no?

“...alright.” I caved.

“Well then—allow me to recommend a location for your lesson.”

Rohtas smiled even wider at my reluctant agreement. I was defeated.

I had already debuted, more or less. And I knew how to dance, more or less.

But still, both were only ‘more or less.’

“Don’t look at your feet! Smile! Keep your back straight!”

My lesson was off to a vigorous start. Rohtas didn’t hold back.

“Yes...!”

I barely managed to respond, miserably. I was so stressed and unhappy that I wanted to cry!

To be perfectly blunt, Rohtas was a demon of an instructor. Evidently, Rohtas was a licensed dance instructor, so he was very good. By contrast, since I hadn’t ever been to functions where I had to formally dance, my dancing abilities were more at the ‘party’ level. From Rohtas’ point of view, my barely-cutting-it dancing had much room for improvement.

Seriously, though, he made me start over from the very basic positions.

“Starting now, let us have dance lessons on rainy days. You are quite a fast learner, Madam,” he said with a bright grin, not even breaking a sweat.

How is it that his smile is like a refreshing sea breeze!? Meanwhile I’m flopped on the sofa like Lady Lethargy! Despite having the lesson only this morning, my body was in bad shape.

I already regretted folding under the pressure of his smile.

After my merciless dance lesson, which had decisively crossed over into a category we will call “Exercises for Killing Time,” I had a light lunch and returned to my room feeling groggy.

“Oh, Madam, are you already worn out?” Mimosa asked, rushing over to me on the sofa where I was lying.

“It’s because he was so harsh! Rohtas is an absolute demon—a demon, I tell you!”

My body was stiff all over, for heaven’s sake! He gave me the ‘you’ll be feeling this tomorrow’ course!

I rubbed my aching lower back as Mimosa said with a laugh, “He worked you over quite well. At this rate, you look like you’ll probably still be sore tomorrow, so leave this to me, Madam!”

There was something in her smile that I couldn't resist.

Wait, didn't this just happen?

"O-okay," I replied with a super awkward smile, like I'd forgotten what normal social interaction was, to which Mimosa responded, "In that case, hold on one moment, please!"

She flew out of my room like a gale force wind.

After a few minutes, she returned with several more personal maids and blurted out, "We shall massage you until you glow, Madam!" with a huge grin.

...what's going to happen to me now!?

Several minutes later:

I was completely, positively glowing, and completely relaxed from head to toe!

That's right. They gave me a full beauty treatment!

"I've always wanted to do this to someone! You still have some spots that need some work, so I'm looking forward to doing this again!"

Mimosa looked at me with shining eyes.

But this girlish glow, though! Now that I think of it, on the few times when I'd let Mimosa dress me up, she'd wiggle her fingers in excitement at the thought of giving me a rub down.

Mimosa looked absolutely content, as if this had been her one true desire.

As for me, even though all of my physical pain was gone, it seemed like something in my psyche had been worn down.

I was mobbed (er, massaged!) by a half dozen maids, rubbed in perfumed oil, and made up in a new hairstyle and makeup to top it all off, and then finally dressed in something other than a uniform.

We're certain you'll love our Madam more than the other brand, or your money back, guaranteed! (Call now!)

"...thank you, everyone... I look... great."

I almost didn't recognize the person staring back at me in the mirror.

Or rather, Mimosa was very good at doing makeup, and her choice of my dress and accessories were excellent. She really was something else.

It was such a thorough transformation that I couldn't stop myself from wondering if they'd used prosthetics!

Celebrity housewives get this sort of thing done everyday, don't they...? I can tell it really doesn't suit me, though. Servant life for the win! No-makeup look for life!

Although I had only spent half the day dancing and the other half playing spa, I was definitely more exhausted than the days when I'd

just sat around in my room.

Despite feeling like I was in a trance, I headed to the servants' dining room to have dinner with Dahlia and Mimosa as I usually did. On the way, Dahlia spoke up.

"Wouldn't it be lovely if we spent rainy days like this from now on? You seem quite revitalized, Madam," she smiled.

There was something I couldn't refuse in Dahlia's smile, too...

15 — The Mission!

At long last, the rainy season was over.

Oh, how I longed for sunny days like these!

Thanks to Demon Instructor Rohtas' dance lessons, my dancing ability had skyrocketed, and thanks to the full beauty treatments on behalf of the Spa Army (which came together in no time flat!) spearheaded by Mimosa, I felt like they'd revealed a whole new me by the end of the rainy season.

My complexion certainly looks better than it did before! My cheeks are soft. My posture has improved from the dance lessons. I'm very, very grateful.

It's too bad no one has gotten a look at me. Not that I need anyone to see me, though.

Another month had passed as I went through this process, making for a total of three months at the duke's residence.

"Pardon me." I was decorating the salon with flowers from Bellis when there was a faint knock; Rohtas appeared in the doorway.

"What is it?"

Rohtas, who usually shut himself away in his office, had come to see me.

Whatever could it be? Thinking of everything that had happened up until now, I suspected bad news and put on a fake smile, bracing myself.

"A letter arrived for you, Madam. I thought you would want to read it, so I brought it with me." Handing over the letter as he said so, I saw that it was written on custom stationery with the Fisalis family crest.

Even just looking at it made the tendons in my right arm hurt! ...No, that wasn't what was causing it.

Just what did I do with that statue of the bear with the fish, anyway? ...nope, not thinking about those thank-you notes anymore.

I stared at the trauma-inducing envelope without taking it.

"It is from your predecessors. They have been waiting to come and see you, and they would like to know when would be a good time," Rohtas summarized for me with a wry smile.

I had met my in-laws at the wedding. That had been my first time seeing them, actually, but I was so busy running around at the time that I was only able to give them a most basic introduction; since they

returned straight home to their own territory afterwards without stopping at the Fisalis manor, I did not have the opportunity to talk with them then, either.

I had sent them a letter, both as a thank-you note and an introduction, but since then, I hadn't written any courtesy letters.

Maybe they thought I was an inconsiderate bride.

Well, it's too late to worry about that.

"Oh, that's right! But this isn't something I can decide by myself."

And then when they show up, it'll be time for the ol' "why yes, we are getting along great" act, won't it?

"Of course, Madam."

"I'll talk it over with Mr. Fisalis when he gets home."

Granted, up until now I've only had the most basic, empty conversations with him.

We have no choice but to collaborate to make this work, since it's related to our contract! And considering that he paid off that huge debt for my family, I intend to abide by the terms of that contract down to the letter!

That evening:

Mimosa let me know when Mr. Fisalis returned home, at which point I changed into my usual simple clothes and rushed to the entrance.

But Rohtas had already finished his daily report, and before I could welcome Mr. Fisalis home, he said, "Rohtas told me about the letter. My apologies for any inconvenience I may cause you, but I'll tell my parents that they can visit in a week."

It was a very straightforward way of informing me that he had made the decision without my input.

Bravo, just what I would expect from someone who treated our wedding like a business transaction!

With no objections, I just replied, "Sure."

Because, you know, that carefree attitude I've adopted as a pretend servant now also extends to his convenience. I don't have to socialize, and I have tons of free time, after all, so I should just play ball when he decides to make my plans for me!

The next words out of his mouth, however, surprised me.

"They will probably stay here for two or three days, so I'll have to come to the manor after work."

I did a double-take in shock. My eyes must have opened up as wide as they could go.

"What!?"

So my in-laws are staying over after all?

Well, that's to be expected, but for Mr. Fisalis to actually come to the

main house—that's completely unexpected!

Mr. Fisalis raised both brows at the obviously incredulous tone to the response I let slip.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

It's incredibly inconvenient for me... but I can't say that!

"Nothing! Nothing at all! That's fine with me!" I denied, in a panic.

Now that he had my agreement, he nodded and said, a little awkwardly, "Well then, they'll stay in the guest room. I suppose I'll have to stay in the master bedroom," as he put his hand over his mouth, apparently thinking about something.

"Right. I'll bring up a cot for the master bedroom, then. I'll sleep there. Please help yourself to the bed."

So long as we wanted to look like we got along, separate bedrooms were out of the question. That much I was sure of, so even though we'd be sharing a room, I wasn't going to let myself get worked up! Still, sleeping in the same bed as him was going to be a hard pass from me.

Same as ever, my candid answer prompted that unreadable expression to reappear on his face.

Mr. Fisalis was silent for a moment.

"But as a man of honor, I could never forgive myself for allowing a lady to sacrifice her comfort on my behalf. I will take the cot..." he finally said, declining my offer.

"Oh, no, it's no trouble at all; please, go ahead! Would you like me to change the sheets to some fresh ones? Or should I bring your pillow over from the cottage?" I forged ahead with a smile.

What if he's not able to sleep on a different pillow? Or he doesn't like my sheets? I need to cover all my bases for him! What about me, you ask? I'm not proud of it, but if left to my own devices, I can fall asleep anywhere!

"...my apologies, but what name do you prefer to go by?" Mr. Fisalis suddenly asked, the moment we settled the question of sleeping arrangements.

What the...? How'd you switch topics so fast?

"Vi, if that's alright with you," I replied with a tilt of my head. I had my doubts about his intentions. He was wearing a suggestive smile, as if he was planning something.

"I was just thinking that we would appear to be more intimate if I called you by a nickname."

Oh, of course! I should have expected as much from a reconnaissance agent! You clever man. We'd certainly appear waaay more intimate if we called each other nicknames!

"Good idea!"

“I’ll call you that when my parents come over, then.”

“Sure.”

“And you...”

“Me? I was just going to call you Mr. Fisalis like I usually do.”

Is there a problem with that? I mean, isn't this whole thing, this woefully mismatched marriage and the childish nicknames all a little ridiculous? Surely that's not where you draw the line.

I told him as much. “...Understood,” he replied. “Well, then.” A forced smile.

Once we finished our briefing on the incoming invasion, Mr. Fisalis turned and rushed off to the cottage as per usual.

“I will make ready the guest room for the Master’s parents and prepare your bedroom, Madam,” Rohtas said after watching Mr. Fisalis leave.

On top of things, as always, Rohtas.

He hadn’t said a single word during the discussion between Mr. Fisalis and I, but he had taken mental notes. He was so quiet I practically forgot he was there.

I almost wondered if he had really just vanished into thin air.

Nevertheless, even though he acted like he wasn’t listening, he had memorized every single word! Excellent work, as always!

“Leave the guest room to me, since I’ve already started to decorate it! Do whatever you think needs to be done in my room. I should be fine if you just shove two sofas together, if there aren’t any up there already.”

Rohtas was silent.

“What’s wrong?”

“Please use the bed!”

He was smiling, but, like before, I got the feeling that he would brook no argument.

“I-if you say so!” I couldn’t help but cringe.

16 — The Visit

The week after my first conversation beyond empty chit-chat with Mr. Fisalis:

We ran around, scrambling to prepare... no, we didn't scramble. In fact, aside from bringing a cot into my room and preparing the guest room for my in-laws, the day of the visit passed like any other.

And I certainly was not to be found screaming, "People are coming over! We need to cleeean!!" down the hall.

You know, because it was so fun to tidy up and decorate with everyone every day.

And then, finally, the day of my in-laws' visit was upon us. They planned to arrive in the afternoon so that we could all eat lunch together, and as a result, I spent the morning changing out all the flowers in the manor. I had Bellis send them over; they were a large-blossomed variety, perfectly suited for entertaining.

I couldn't afford to be caught in a maid's uniform on a day like this, so I was wearing a subdued orange dress of Mimosa's choosing.

She got mad at me when I instinctively went to roll up the sleeves.

They're scheduled to arrive in the afternoon, so it makes sense that Mr. Fisalis isn't here. I'm sure he's at the cottage with his girlfriend, reluctant to leave her, even just for a short while.

Someone will go and get him once his parents arrive (and by 'someone,' I mean one of the personal maids) and since I'd rather not try to get in between the lovebirds, I'll let them be.

"So is that everything for the preparations?" I asked myself out loud.

It's noon now.

The manor was freshly be-flowered, with blossoms even decorating the dining room table, and once Cartham added his much-awaited food to that table, we'd be set! Since we were done preparing as far as that was concerned, I went over everything we'd done in my head and asked Mimosa if she agreed.

"Yep, we're all done!" she confirmed, looking around.

Just as I thought to myself, *alrighty, now all there is left to do is wait for them to arrive*, the dining room door opened.

It was Rohtas. "Madam, Lord and Lady Fisalis have arrived."

"Let's go out to meet them, then. Hurry now."

I was all fired up, ready to do my best.

My mission as the perfect wife starts now!

In my excitement, however, I had forgotten all about Mr. Fisalis.

“Rohtas, where is Mr. Fisalis?” I asked him as we hurried from the dining room to the entrance.

“I just sent for his personal maid now,” he answered coolly.

That was Rohtas for you—he never overlooked a thing.

“Excellent.” Mr. Fisalis can come up with his own excuse if he’s late.

I was a little nervous to greet Lord and Lady Fisalis, having not seen them since the wedding.

My in-laws...

According to Mimosa, around the same time that Mr. Fisalis succeeded his peerage at the age of twenty, his parents left the manor to live by themselves in the territory, very passionately in love.

According to Rohtas, since Mr. Fisalis made his living as a knight, and more importantly, was a member of the elite, he was often very busy, which was why the management of the territory lay squarely in his father’s hands.

The Fisalis duchy was located in an area not too far from the royal capital, and unlike my own family’s land, boasted fertile soil and abundant mineral resources. And since the duchy was so big, managing it was quite the challenge, so governing the land while also serving in court would be impossible, it seems.

On a related note, tourism brought in quite a lot of money, given how picturesque the landscape was.

Aside from the main territory, I understood that there were also enclaves scattered here and there, but I’ll spare you the boring details.

In terms of their mineral resources, they were particularly well-known for several varieties of gemstones. Among them, the pigeon’s blood ruby was considered the most precious.

(I put this information together based on what I had heard from the servants).

Their crops are plentiful, their mines rich in gems, and to top it all off, they earn money through tourism! Are they too blessed to be stressed, or what!? The Fisalis family must be inconceivably wealthy.

I pulled this info from the recesses of my mind and mulled it over on the way to the entrance hall.

Once I arrived there, Rohtas majestically opened the front door. What awaited me on the other side was...

“Well, if it isn’t Viola! It’s been such a long time! Have you been well?” my mother-in-law gushed with a smile as she ran up to me. She was in her late forties, and yet, she looked so young it seemed impossible she had a twenty-four-year-old son! I had noticed how beautiful she was on my wedding day, but she was so incredibly

dressed up that I had figured she must have been fifty percent more dazzling than normal. I was totally wrong.

I learned then that all of her beauty and class was natural.

It was like she had a halo of light radiating from behind her as she flew through the open doors, lit from behind by the sun. Her gleaming blonde hair dazzled my eyes from where I stood in the shady doorway, and it even seemed to glitter somewhat in the light.

I suppose that even if I wasn't standing in the shade, her hair would still appear to shine like that, though.

I guess Mr. Fisalis gets his elegant figure from this one. I don't mind that you seem to be emitting a glittering aura of beauty, but it's highlighting my own plainness, so please refrain from getting too close to me.

"We've heard so much about you from Rohtas. You seem to be doing well."

My father-in-law came in slowly behind his wife. He was a tall, calm gentleman with dark brown eyes that narrowed when he smiled at me.

...and his height and coloring from this one.

His slightly unruly dark brown hair had been smoothed down, and he was smartly dressed in well-tailored clothes. All and all, he was definitely attractive enough to seduce a girl at the drop of a hat. He looked handsome with his arm around my mother-in-law's shoulders, every bit the model gentleman.

I let slip that I struggled to understand how these two kind people managed to produce such a fiendish son.

But, moving on! I needed to formally greet them as well.

"Father, Mother—it is my utmost pleasure to see you. It's been so long. Under ordinary circumstances, I should be the one visiting you, so thank you for coming all this way to see us."

Pinching my skirt, I gave a curtsy.

Yes! I was able to get through my greeting without stuttering!! I stopped myself from pumping my fist into the air, but couldn't hold back a satisfied smile.

"Why don't we do away with all these formalities?" my father-in-law said with a strained laugh, in utter contrast to my grin.

I was sure he'd bite his tongue if he had to continue to speak that stiffly. And bloodshed was something I'd prefer to avoid.

"Yes, let's," I responded, accepting his offer to be more straightforward and casual.

"That's much better! We are family, after all," my mother-in-law agreed.

"Why don't we continue our conversation over lunch? Cartham was in even higher spirits than usual, so I'm sure it will be extra delicious." Having returned to my normal unreserved way of speaking,

I exchanged a look with Rohtas, asking him to lead them to the dining room when...

“Terribly sorry I’m late. I was just taking a walk in the garden.” An eloquent voice echoed through the entrance hall.

We all turned around simultaneously at the sound. The massive front doors had opened again and Mr. Fisalis had just gallantly stepped through them.

...*Oh, I forgot he would be here today.* I mentally stuck out my tongue at him.

Mr. Fisalis’ whole existence had slipped my mind, out of habit.

That’s right, we sent for his personal maid, didn’t we? So that’s your excuse then, mister?

It was like I could hear every servant’s inner stand-up comedian voice saying, “Why you be lyin’!” But my in-laws just let the excuse fly.

“Oh, I see. It’s been some time since we’ve seen you, too.”

“Yes, it has.”

Mr. Fisalis’ eyes, the same color as his father’s, narrowed when he flashed a refreshing smile, also just like his father.

“I’m relieved that you seem to be doing well,” my mother-in-law told him with a grin.

Standing in the midst of these two beautiful people—so closely resembling each other, too—was a glorious sight to behold! Plain as I was, I was a tiny bit envious.

I almost needed solar eclipse glasses to withstand their radiance!

I’m exaggerating a little, of course.

Not that it would affect the taste, but isn’t Cartham’s food probably getting cold? Now that we were all present and had said our hellos, I thought that we ought to make our way to the dining room.

“I believe lunch is ready, everyone.” Rohtas stepped in with excellent timing, politely putting an end to the chit-chat.

17 — Eating Together

Now that I thought of it, this was my first time eating in the main dining room since I had arrived at the Fialis house. I had been eating with the servants in their dining room since my second day, unable to bear eating alone. I had even eaten breakfast there that morning and was already very at home in there, but that was my little secret.

We had started to move to the dining room with Rohtas leading the way, followed by Lord Fialis and Mr. Fialis, and then Lady Fialis and I, but Lady Fialis suddenly stopped just as we were about to leave the entrance hall.

“Goodness, what beautiful flowers! I had no idea we grew this variety!” she exclaimed, looking back and forth between me and the flowers.

What had caught her eye was the vase of flowers I’d placed in the entryway that morning.

“Bellis ordered these for me recently,” I said, once I understood what she was looking at.

“Ehh!? Bellis did!?” In stark contrast to my casual answer, my mother-in-law’s shock seemed like quite an over-reaction.

“That’s right. Bellis kindly orders and raises the flowers I like.”

That Demon King has a green thumb for sure, and has been doing a great job raising them. It’s so unfortunate that he has such a scary face and antisocial attitude!

My mother-in-law interrupted my thoughts of Bellis’ appearance, though.

“My word! You can actually *talk* with Bellis!?”

She held her face between her hands as her twinkling sapphire-like eyes fixed on me.

Isn’t she getting a little worked up over nothing?

“Mmhmm, he’s a really nice guy.”

“I’m impressed, Viola. That Bellis is moody, and shy, and frightful. Nothing about him makes one want to talk to him whatsoever. Oho, the flowers are so wonderful.”

She loves them, Bellis!

I mentally thanked him, facing toward the greenhouse.

Then my mother-in-law’s face completely shifted from shock to a gentle, sparkling smile. It seemed as though something inside of her approved. Perhaps she’d had some hurdles to clear with Bellis, but I

wasn't sure.

My in-laws couldn't stop looking around either. Lord Fisalis, who had been ahead of us, turned around, looked at the flower vase again, and smiled. I thought he hadn't noticed it was even there.

You know what they say, though: that it's us women who are acutely aware of subtle changes.

"I'm glad you think so! I'm sure Bellis would be happy, too."

Their compliments made me so happy, because they were complimenting Bellis too!

"Are you saying you're the one who has spruced up the house, then, not Bellis?" asked Lady Fisalis.

"Me?"

"Yes," she giggled.

I mean, I was the one who decorated the place with gorgeous flowers, yes, but saying that would feel like taking credit for Bellis' efforts, too.

We were standing there in front of the vase, admiring the flowers, when Mr. Fisalis said, "Let's get going. Our food is getting cold," in his usual cool voice. We departed for the dining room a second time.

Mr. Fisalis had been there the whole time! He was so quiet until just that moment (he hadn't said anything, I mean) that I thought he'd disappeared into thin air.

We were following Mr. Fisalis and his father, so I was able to smile as I watched the younger Fisalis looking this way and that.

It's your own house, but it doesn't seem like it, does it? It really has been a long while since you've been in here, huh?

This was the first time he'd been inside these rooms since I'd arrived. I'd decorated with flowers and switched out the textiles and furniture. I had a good time customizing everything with the servants, so the overall tone had changed considerably.

My in-laws couldn't stop looking around either.

"I say, everything's been totally rejuvenated! It feels so much brighter!"

"That's right! You have excellent taste, Viola!" They showered me with praise.

It was only Mr. Fisalis who remained silent. As usual.

No sooner had we taken our seats in the dining room than the maids waiting on us brought out the food.

There was no way I could get away with eating a servants' meal today, so it was back to one-on-one combat with my GI tract.

Pro-bio-tics! Go, pro-bio-tics!

We had discussed the menu with Cartham before we ordered.

"I'd like half-size portions for mine." I'd secretly asked Cartham and the maid in charge of serving, beforehand!

"Oui, Madame."

“Understood, Madam. We’ll make sure not to mix up the orders!” the maid agreed.

“The main dish today is veal with herbs, served with a Rheinian sauce.”

Rohtas gracefully set my father-in-law’s dish in front of him.

Ah, so today’s foods were proposed by an apprentice from the Rheine region! That region is known for its rather intense spices.

I had learned the characteristics of each region’s cuisine as a result of eating dishes from different regions every day. I wasn’t sure where or when I’d use that information, though.

I really wanted to eat what the servants were having today, darn it!

My plate was brought to me while I was still lost in thought, wishing I was eating in the servants’ dining room. The meat was roasted until golden-brown and delicious—not to mention that it was juicy and succulent, too. The flame must have been expertly controlled; that is, the heat was cut off at the point of maximum juiciness.

Cartham, you really are a master ch— ... nope, just gonna keep eating.

The Rheine region was known for its use of herbs, and their characteristic aroma really stimulated one’s appetite!

Assuming the role of culinary critic as he stared at his plate, my father-in-law commented pleasantly, “Well now, isn’t this Rheinian regional cuisine?”

“Indeed it is, sir,” Rohtas responded.

“I knew it. I was there on holiday at one point; their food was so delicious.”

“Oh, it really was.” My mother-in-law locked eyes with my father-in-law and they both smiled and blushed...

Please, get a room, you two.

I had heard that they were still very much in love, but they didn’t need to show it off in front of me...

Blegh, too much PDA.

“I never thought we’d be eating this at home,” Lord Fisalis said, leaving his wistful two-person dreamland.

“I agree. They’ve really added a range of regional dishes to the menu lately. Have you noticed, Vi?” Mr. Fisalis abruptly said, breaking his silence.

And he used my nickname! Eeek! I was so surprised!

He’d been so quiet, I was totally unprepared for it.

Now that he’d mentioned it, the servants’ (and my own) culinary adventure had also extended to the meals served to Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend. I wasn’t sure if that was something they’d pick up on, though.

I had the vague impression that it was the sauce and cooking

method.

“Er, um, well... the cooks have been teaching me things. The apprentice cooks have come here from all over, and whatnot.”

I didn’t go into detail—just sort of beat around the bush.

Or, more precisely, I never considered that Mr. Fisalis would even notice the change, so I wasn’t able to hide my surprise when he did. Even Rohtas and the other servants were surprised, but of course, they didn’t show it.

“Ah, that explains it.” Mr. Fisalis’ eyebrows perked upwards in acknowledgment.

“They’re really onto something, Viola and Cartham,” my father-in-law praised. I’d just wanted to eat interesting new food, though.

Oho, some constructive criticism for my thorough studies!

“So you call Viola ‘Vi,’ then, Cercis?” his mother innocently asked.

That’s what you latch on to? Even though we were talking about regional cuisine? You know, about what I learned from the chefs? And you immediately jumped to my nickname!

“Yup, that’s right,” I responded, smiling at Mr. Fisalis like nothing was wrong, but I was actually on the verge of falling out of my chair.

Why, yes. You call me that. All. The. Time. Right? I grinned.

“That’s so cute! Do you mind if I call you Vi, too?”

Who could say no to my mother-in-law’s pearly white smile?

“Oh, of course,” I smiled back, my slightly-less-pearly-whites at full power.

It costs nothing to smile, and I’ll be darned if I don’t like saving money.

There’s no hidden dark side to a smile. Nothing questionable about a smile from a nearly bankrupt earl’s daughter.

Right?

Her stunning smile, too beautiful for my mere mortal eyes, made me feel kind of insignificant.

Once we finished our laid-back lunch, we moved to the salon, which turned out to pique my in-laws’ curiosity even further.

No, really. The second they set foot in the room:

“Is this... the furniture I brought with me when I got married?”

Lady Fisalis caught sight of the tea table and walked over to it, her eyes fixed on it.

“It is. I saw it in storage and fell in love with it immediately... Sorry for taking it out without asking you first.”

“Why are you apologizing? I’m thrilled you like it. Seeing it now after so long, it does look rather cute and retro.”

She ran her finger over the parquetry in the tabletop, narrowing her eyes.

“Well, I was just taken by how cute it was!”

More than merely ‘taken,’ I had fallen head over heels for it.

As a result, my renovations weren't just limited to the table, but the entire set: the sofa, chairs, everything.

Then, as if to confirm what she was feeling under her fingers, my mother-in-law slowly touched the upholstery before sitting down on the sofa. She then took one of the throw pillows the servants and I had crafted so painstakingly.

"What's this?" she asked with a tilt of her lovely neck.

"It's something I've been amusing myself with. I found a plant in the garden that's good for making dye, and I just..."

Noble ladies usually get angry or momentarily put off at the sight of such working class efforts, but she was different.

"Isn't this wonderful! You included the family crest, too. This is excellent work, Vi!"

For some reason she was spilling over with praise for me. Phew.

Her enthusiasm never waned until at last, overcome with emotion, she was moved to tears.

Mr. Fisalis had been standing with his parents when they entered the salon, but he had gone quiet again, and remained so for some time.

It seemed like perhaps going dead silent was his brain's way of processing new information.

Just something I noticed from personal observation.

Even though he knew that I'd taken the liberty of adding my own personal touches to the manor—he'd heard about it through Rohtas, and I had brought it up myself (albeit rather in a rather sugar-coated way)—he'd never seen the results, and so wasn't aware of the extent of the change.

Anyway, on to the results of the house call from my in-laws.

I'm happy to report that I really like them!

And I've become a good wife! I'm gonna give myself a pat on the back!

18 — A Lot to Talk About

That night:

After Mr. Fisalis and I escorted my in-laws to their room, we retired to our own room.

Wow, I've been in the same room as him the whole time his parents were here today. I won't have even a moment's break from him, but that's all part of the mission.

I've got no room to complain, though, so I might as well accept my fate.

I followed behind Mr. Fisalis as he walked silently.

Wait a sec.

He opened the door to the master bedroom, then stopped.

"...Did you...?"

Although he had been about to walk in, he stayed in the doorway with his hand still on the doorknob and looked around the room.

"Yes? What's the matter?" I asked, from slightly behind him.

Did he have a problem with the room? I'd had the cot brought in like he'd asked. I could see it clearly from my vantage point at his side.

"No... it's just so different from what I was imagining," he muttered.

Oh, so the room just looks different from what he was expecting.

Now that I think of it, he hasn't been in here since the day of our wedding. The furnishings haven't changed since then, but I've definitely made it my own!

What had caught his eye were the numerous crafts I'd made with scrap fabric that were scattered across the room.

There were more throw pillows, of course, but also a duvet and a little lap blanket.

Stitching happily with the maids made for prolific output.

We had all worked on the curtains, though, dyeing and reusing a bunch of leftover fabric.

Everything came out stunningly, if I do say so myself!

"Oh, er, we had a lot of beautiful fabric laying around, so I put these together when I found the time!"

Deep down, I was really proud of what I'd made. Then, as if something had jolted his memory, Mr. Fisalis mumbled, "The handkerchief you gave me was very nicely made, too."

"I'm honored that you like it!"

Oh, what's this?

He just looked at me now.

He liked it that much.

"Really, though, this is entirely different from what I was picturing..." he murmured again. He had his fist to his mouth, as if in thought.

"Should I have left it as it was?"

I'd be miffed if he told me then, of all times, that he didn't like it.

"No, not at all."

The sharp look in his eyes relaxed somewhat as he looked at me.

The room had been mostly white and decorated simply, but thanks to the patchwork crafts I'd made, it now sported a country aesthetic. With the addition of my favorite flowers, I had turned it into a comfy space to call my own.

"Please do come in," Dahlia stepped out of the little room where I kept my clothes. She must have been tidying up.

An "excuse me," from just behind us in the hall alerted us to Mimosa's presence. We let her through so she could carry her tray of tea into the room. She set it down on the table by the sofa.

I didn't intend to chat with Mr. Fisalis while we had our tea, though.

I couldn't turn down the tea Mimosa took so much time to make, after all, just to talk to him! The tea would command my full attention!

Mr. Fisalis sat down on the sofa first and, after a brief moment of thought, I took the chair catty-corner to him.

Let's avoid facing him directly.

He sat back deep into the sofa and elegantly crossed his legs. He looked so good it was absurd.

The tension in his neck suddenly relaxed, and he said, "Today was nothing but surprises," as he stared at me. Rather than saying it in a surprised tone, however, he said it with his usual eloquence and a smile like a marble statue. That was basically how he looked all the time.

"What was it that surprised you?"

Now that I mentioned it, he did stiffen up and go dead silent several times when he was trying to process information.

"I was most surprised by how different it feels inside the manor now, I suppose." His gaze still wandered all about the master bedroom as if he was mentally cataloging all the changes.

I hope you don't mind if my eyes wander a bit, too.

Hopefully I didn't go overboard, changing out all the furniture and decorating.

Reaching for the tea that Mimosa had brought, I gracefully

brought the cup to my lips. With slightly upturned eyes, I nervously asked, "...did my changes ruin the mood?"

After he took a gulp of his tea, he responded, without looking at me, "No, if anything, you've enlivened it. Thank you."

He shut his eyes, apparently enjoying the aftertaste of his tea.

His long eyelashes cast a shadow on his cheeks.

Why are they longer than mine, dangit!?

Putting my desire to pity myself aside, I was relieved when he didn't fault me for all of this.

"Oh, I'm glad. I really did have a good time decorating the manor with the servants."

"Ah, it did seem like the servants have been enjoying themselves, as of late."

I said nothing as he gazed at me with eyes opened ever so slightly, and I stared back at him in utterly graceless puzzlement.

The servants always enjoyed themselves, though.

With a slight tilt to his head, he explained, "They've been decorating the cottage with flowers, too. I hadn't really thought about it before—to think that the maids who did such tedious work would do something like that, too."

"I see now. I recall that your personal maid has been taking our leftover flowers."

"Callie was shocked."

Oh, so now you're bringing the girlfriend into the story.

In other words, Mr. Fisalis didn't notice any change, but she did.

Hehe, of course she did!

"Was she?"

"And at the food, too."

"Oh, that was..."

"I didn't notice anything at first, but Callie did right away. I guess because she's been to so many different places, she's familiar with foreign cuisine."

Woo boy, why are you still talking about her?

Although his expression had been neutral up until now, as soon as the conversation turned towards his girlfriend, his heart seemed to melt and he couldn't stop smiling.

Is this him gushing about his girlfriend? At that moment, I felt a chill coming from Dahlia's place by the wall, but Mr. Fisalis went on blabbering about Calendula without noticing.

I decided to pretend like I didn't notice Dahlia, either. I looked away from the two maids radiating all that dark energy.

"You can continue to do as you please. Money is no object, either."

What a snobbish thing to say.

“There’s no need for that! I didn’t come here to spend money.”

“Er, but...”

Maybe a girl’s never told him that she didn’t want his money.

He gazed at me softly.

“There are so many wonderful things here, even without more money. That’s more than enough for me!” I declared.



If that wasn't the story of my life!

“...So, it's not money...”

He stared at me, dumbfounded, for some time, as if something in his soul had snapped and washed over him in a flood.

I wondered if that was really what it was, though.

Eventually, he came back to himself and squinted at me.

“...I see. Well, since I must go to work tomorrow, I'll leave my parents to you. They'll be staying here tomorrow, and then return home the day after. Please do your best to attend to their needs,” he told me, sounding grateful.

I was stunned. This was out of character for him.

I smiled back at him, not revealing my shock.

“I will.”

Because if I can get through tomorrow, I can go back to playing a carefree servant! I'll give it everything I've got!

“Shall we try and get some rest, then?” he asked.

“Yes!”

Mr. Fisalis then excused himself to the ensuite bathroom near the office. I had prepared everything in there ahead of time, as usual.

It had been determined that Mr. Fisalis would bathe and get ready for bed in the office and his unused personal room next door.

I was keeping that line between us absolutely clear! No gray area to be seen!

That rather normal-seeming conversation we had, however... we hadn't had one like that ever since he came to me with his offer... er, proposal. The day he came to me with those fiendish terms and conditions!

The next day:

I had breakfast in the main dining room with my in-laws and Mr. Fisalis. After I saw Mr. Fisalis off on his way to work, I headed out to the garden with Lord and Lady Fisalis, Dahlia, and Rohtas. My mother-in-law said that she wanted to see how much the garden had changed, too.

To put it simply, the garden had been completely rejuvenated.

There were still some of my mother-in-law's preferred austere flowers, but at the request of the servants and I, Bellis had brought in more showy varieties. The temperate, sun-drenched garden now mesmerized with its deep greens and kaleidoscope of colored flowers.

I was a bit worried that I'd removed all her favorites, until my mother-in-law exclaimed, “Oh my goodness, you've made the garden so gay and splendid, too!!”

The way her eyes sparkled with praise made my worries seem like

nonsense.

Phew.

"I couldn't have done it without Demon King Bellis and all the hard work he puts in everyday," I quipped.

"Hmm, you're able to get through to Bellis that well? You're something else, Vi. He has a handsome face to be sure, but didn't his lack of social skills make him hard to get close to?"

You said that yesterday, Mother.

I wondered if it wasn't her who had a hard time approaching people.

"Hmm, yes, at first. But by working with him and seeing how he interacted with Mimosa, I was able to tell that he was a nice person, deep down inside!"

"Oh, I don't know how to thank you, Vi!" Lady Fisalis was deeply impressed, somehow.

Her eyes quickly started to fill with tears, looking like dewy star sapphires, and I wondered again if this was some form of approval from her.

And then all of a sudden she'd swept me into a tight hug.

Ergh!

She was surprisingly strong for someone who looked so delicate!

"Y-you're welcome."

My father-in-law strained to smile at his wife as she crushed me until it was obvious that my voice was cracking. "Dear, if you hug her that tightly, you're going to hurt her."

Squeezing your daughter-in-law to death isn't a good look! Please stop! I don't know if the voice inside my head reached her, or if it was her husband's words that brought her back to her senses. She said "Oh, I beg your pardon. Oh ho ho," as she loosened her grip around my airways.

"...not at all."

She nearly killed me!

Ambling along in the garden, we soon found ourselves near the cottage.

Oh, crap.

...I started to panic and got flustered.

Oh no, I wasn't paying attention and now we're at the cottage. What do I do? I called out to Dahlia with my eyes.

My father-in-law was staring distantly at the thicket where the cottage was hidden. "We didn't know what to think when we heard that he was associating with a vagrant dancing girl." And with that, the mellow feeling we'd been enjoying until that moment went completely out the window, replaced by something awkward and heavy.

“I, um.” I stumbled over my words, unsure how to respond. I didn’t want to say anything that would make it worse.

I’ll wait and see what Lord Fisalis says, for now.

“No matter how opposed to it we were, he stubbornly refused to part with her. We admitted defeat, more or less. We couldn’t believe our eyes, then, when all of a sudden, a letter came that said he broke it off with her and decided to marry the daughter of the Euphorbia family. We turned that letter over and over, up and down, just... shocked.”

I could see the emotion in my father-in-law’s eyes.

You sent them a letter brimming with lies, Mr. Fisalis.

I kept my mouth shut and murmured my agreement back.

“When Rohtas confirmed it, we knew it was true,” he continued.

Et tu, Rohtas? I gave the butler some intense side-eye, but he wouldn’t meet my gaze. This was premeditated!

“Everything turned out splendid, though, when he found a nice girl like you,” Lord Fisalis said, slowly turning his gaze away from the thicket and towards me. I gave him a broad smile in return. I was relieved when the earlier awkwardness lifted, even if just for a moment.

...no, what I really wanted was to be able to tell him the truth to his face.

“He’s right. Even though we doubted our son’s taste in women for a time.” *Goodness, Mother, way to tear your son down. But then again, only real parents and children can say something so brutal about one another with a smile on their face.*

So Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend are very much still together, but he and Rohtas are hiding that fact, and I can’t afford to say anything that would arouse suspicion.

But considering what my mother-in-law said—that I was chosen by a man with no taste in women—it seemed like she thought that Calendula was not a good person. A debt-ridden, poverty-stricken earl’s plain, average daughter and a wealthy duke?

No matter how you sliced it, it looked like it was all just about money and self-interest.

Being plain is so depressing...

As I stood there wallowing in my own private bubble of self-pity, my father-in-law said to me with a smile, “We wish him nothing but the best from here on out.” I felt as though I had no choice but to agree.

Ah, well, there’s no need to worry, Father.

Our contract is airtight, after all!

19 — A Sudden Return Home

Lord and Lady Fisalis returned home the next day, positively delighted—or more honestly, deceived—by our performance, which was supported backstage by a complex web of lies.

My in-laws' departure meant that Mr. Fisalis could return to the cottage, as well, which in turn meant that I could go back to my happy servant life! Pretty dresses are nice and all, but I still preferred my uniform! I'll leave the dresses to sexy bombshells.

Nice dresses like those are wasted on me.

I saw my in-laws, who told me they'd eat lunch somewhere outside, off with a big smile on my face. As soon as their carriage disappeared, I ran back to my room.

Removing my makeup and changing my clothes was like a full battery recharge!

"Freeeeedommmm!"

I know it was terrible manners, but I flopped onto my pillowy bed with an audible *fwump*. This big, gorgeous bed was all mine again after two whole days!

"Madam. No one is around to see you, but..." sighed Dahlia with a strained smile.

"I knowww, Dahlia. Just a little more, though," I answered as I nuzzled my cheek into the freshly-changed, silky-to-the-touch sheets.

Ahh, being able to rub my face on the sheets like this with no makeup on is the best! I really put in a lot of effort to put on my fanciest... no, my most no-makeup makeup look in front of my in-laws.

I was pretty worried, though, that my skin wouldn't be able to breathe under all of that.

Dahlia's eyes softened in resignation at my request. "I suppose it would be alright if you took a short nap," she said, covering me with a quilt.

"Mmhm, just a little nap..."

All I need is to shut my eyes and recharge a little. Then I can get back to playing servant... zzz.

Between my in-laws visiting and having to share a room with Mr. Fisalis, I was more worn out than I had realized. By the time I woke up, it was well past noon and into early evening. I was startled by how dim the room had become and sat up with a little shriek.

That wasn't a nap, that was hibernation! I roasted myself.

Too bad Dahlia or Mimosa hadn't woken me up! I didn't get to eat lunch with everyone... Nooo!

Mimosa interrupted my pity-party with a knock on the door.

"Are you awake, Madam?"

"Yes. I slept like a log, though."

"You must have been exhausted if you didn't wake up," she consoled me as a gentle smile appeared on her face.

Her smile, right then, made me feel a hundred percent better.

"I guess so. Looks like I'm better suited to running around cleaning and decorating with you all."

"Oh, er. I'm not so..." Mimosa's saintly healing smile turned a little forced.

Who could blame her, though? What I said wasn't exactly becoming of my status!

A week later:

I had returned to happily passing my days playing servant when, suddenly, something extraordinary happened.

"Madam, Master has returned," Mimosa informed me, like she always did.

I rose from the sofa to go downstairs. "Thank you. Let's get going."

That's right. I've taught myself as of late to time my transformation into respectable clothes to just before Mr. Fisalis gets home.

I was bound to blow my cover eventually if I was changing in a hurry every day! It only took a second to apply a little bit of makeup, just enough to look nice but still light enough that my skin could breathe.

I pretended not to notice Mimosa's disappointment at this.

Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas were talking like they usually were when I arrived at the entrance.

When he noticed me excitedly coming toward him, Mr. Fisalis smiled and said, "I'm home."

He had that sparkling, fake smile that he always had whenever I saw him.

And even though I knew how fake it was, it was still a sight for sore eyes.

I accidentally stared too long, enthralled, before I greeted him with a "Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis" and an A-grade, albeit, not-quite-million-dollar smile of my own.

Although we made the usual perfunctory conversation afterward and then wrapped up our meeting, no one could have foreseen the words that spilled from Mr. Fisalis' lips after that.

"I am glad to hear that everything has been going along just fine.

Oh—will you tell me about your day over dinner?”

Excuse me? What was that? I must be hearing things.

“Pardon?”

“While we’re eating,” he pressed, in response to my clumsy answer.

I heard you loud and clear that time.

And yet, I couldn’t comprehend what he said—it was like my brain refused to process it.

I wasn’t the only one who was wondering how we landed in this predicament—even Rohtas, who was usually so cool, calm, and collected was agitated. He, too, appeared to be having a hard time coming to grips with this new information.

The confusion had spread even to Dahlia and Mimosa behind me.

The only one who didn’t sense the awkward feeling hanging in the air seemed to be Mr. Fisalis himself.

Unbelievable.

Today, Mr. Fisalis. Is going to eat dinner. In the house. With me.

It was like my brain had started to shake its head ‘no’ in denial.

Is he for real?

...nope, brain still isn’t settling down.

“You mean that you are going to have dinner here, Master?”

Rohtas confirmed, the first to straighten out his thoughts.

“That is what I’ve been saying,” Mr. Fisalis scowled at Rohtas, irritated that no one understood him the first time.

You’re the one that pushed us into this pit of confusion in the first place, you know!

“As you wish, Master. Please wait in the salon until dinner is ready,” Rohtas politely acknowledged.

“Of course.” Mr. Fisalis nodded and headed toward the salon.

...okay, where should I go? No, wait—before that, we need an emergency meeting!

“I was totally lost in space for a minute there! Thanks for the quick fix, Rohtas!”

Once Mr. Fisalis was out of sight, Rohtas, Dahlia, Mimosa, and I spontaneously gathered in a circle to talk. We drew together and talked in hushed voices, since the entranceway was basically an echo chamber.

“Thank you kindly for your praise, but if I’m quite honest, my mind momentarily went blank as well,” Rohtas said with a wry smile.

“I seriously thought he was speaking in a foreign language! I didn’t understand a thing!” Dahlia said. Next to her, Mimosa nodded in agreement. Seems like I wasn’t the only one whose brain couldn’t compute what Mr. Fisalis had said.

But now wasn’t the time for us to be playing confessional booth.

“In the meantime, we can’t just stand around like this. Rohtas, go inform Cartham and have him start dinner.” Now that my brain was back online, I was able to determine what needed to be done.

“As you wish,” Rohtas bowed.

I acknowledged his courtesy and then turned to Dahlia.

“Dahlia, tell the personal maids who aren’t on break right now that they are to serve dinner.”

“Understood, Madam,” she confirmed with a nod.

“Mimosa, you and I will see to Mr. Fisalis.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And I... I’m having dinner with Mr. Fisalis whether I like it or not. Oh, I had better tell Cartham and the maids to make me only a half-size serving again. Alright, that’s it, everyone, break!”

“Yes, Madam,” they all replied.

And at that, Rohtas and Dahlia briskly disappeared toward the kitchen.

Mimosa and I, meanwhile, were off to the salon.

Ahh, and here I was thinking I was about to return to my quiet, everyday life!

In a curious turn of events, Mr. Fisalis is going to appear here, in this house, a second time!

That in and of itself should not compute.

20 — An Awkward Dinner

Although Mimosa and I hurried after Mr. Fisalis to the salon, I wasn't sure what we should talk about once we were there.

Do I look like I know how to make small talk, with how little I socialize?

Right then, I deeply regretted having Rohtas assume the role of host and run off to deliver my message to Cartham!

We weren't the only ones running down the halls, though. The servants were quietly running all over the manor, too.

This was something I'd come to understand after being around them all the time. This moment was utter chaos! And I was in the thick of it!

Mr. Fisalis was coming here! Since when does he do *that*!?

The man in question was already right at home on the sofa in the salon.

Ugh, how long are we going to have to make idle chit-chat? I've got a bad feeling about this. A real bad feeling.

"My apologies for making you wait," I told him. "Let me make you some tea."

"Oh, yes, please."

The first thing to do when entertaining is to make some delicious tea. Although I was planning on using this to fill the time, Mimosa snatched the teapot out of my hands, saying, "I'll do it, Madam," with a smile.

What's this? Mimosa wishes to enter into one-on-one combat with Mr. Fisalis!?

"...thank you." I folded. Making tea was technically a personal maid's job.

I tearfully handed over the rest of the tea-making supplies.

Hm, what else can I do?

Oh, that's right! The second step for proper entertaining: serving delicious sweets! I clapped my hands together at the thought.

"In that case, let me go get some sw—" I said as I turned to leave.

"I already brought those with me, too," Mimosa said with a smile, stopping me dead in my tracks.

I see.

Seems like Mimosa is my real opponent today.

"...oh, thank you."

Unfortunately, I was stuck there. Resistance was futile. I felt my smile twitch ever so slightly, and I sat on a sofa diagonal to Mr. Fisalis.

My irrational fears, however, were quieted.

Which is to say: at that moment, Rohtas came calling for us! His halo was really shining brighter than usual that day.

And it wasn't just Rohtas.

The servants normally work alongside me harmoniously and with youthful enthusiasm, but it is because they are servants of the impeccable Fisalis family that they are highly competent even under stress! Right then, they made me fall in love with them all over again!

"What did you do today?" Mr. Fisalis asked me, as the last dessert was finally brought to the table.

That's what you meant when you said you wanted to continue the conversation? We're absolutely not having a bland conversation like that, where you talk about whatever nonsense, or just say, "Oh this is delicious," and "This must be regional"!

Proper conversation is something you have to enjoy with the food.

In other words, there would be time to spare between dishes. The chefs and servants under Cartham knew that and planned accordingly, bringing out only small morsels.

The next dish will be waiting for us when we finish the first, it seems. There's barely any time for conversation or anything after all; we're being fed like dogs.

Unsurprisingly, Mr. Fisalis looks puzzled, but I'll pretend not to notice and just focus on eating.

And then, after the dessert course, I finally had the chance to answer Mr. Fisalis' question.

"You wanted to hear about my day?"

"Yes."

"Well, since the weather was so nice today, I took a walk around the garden and had a nap. I even had lunch on the terrace!"

Er, well, that was a sugar coated version of things. A bunch of annoying things happened, too.

Actually, when I went out to the garden, I was distracted by Bellis and the gardeners cutting the grass, and accidentally poked Mimosa with the parasol I had with me to prevent sunburn. And then, I was so tired that I fell asleep during the picnic lunch on the terrace with the servants.

That's how my day *actually* went.

Planting your favorite flowers in a spot you cleaned up yourself is really fun, though!

...of course, I couldn't tell him that.

I grinned, wondering if the flowers I had planted would blossom

quickly.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. The garden sure has changed, hasn't it?"

Maybe my smile looked strange to him, because he was looking at me intently when our eyes met.

I was confronted with a radiant, jovial smile.

"It really has. Bellis and his assistants have worked very hard."

But as soon as I said this, the radiant smile vanished.

"Oh, I see. I'm glad the servants are doing such good work," he said coldly, somewhat more tense than before.

He drank his after-dinner tea in silence.

It was the same as before; he was leaning back in his chair, legs elegantly crossed, obviously relaxed. He truly looked like a portrait.

I eyed his refined form as I pondered the following question over and over in my head.

...what do I do with him after this?

Should I watch for hints, or do I just gather the courage to ask him?

I probably wasn't the only one wondering this.

I looked at Rohtas, waiting for instruction quietly against the wall; he faintly shook his head.

Dahlia, Mimosa, and the rest did the same.

As I watched what they were trying to tell me, Mr. Fisalis finished his tea and quietly placed his cup on the saucer before saying, "I'll be going now," and rising from his seat.

Although he was already out of his seat, he hadn't given me enough information yet.

It was possible that he was headed towards his room (and by that, I mean the private bedroom he never used).

"You mean, going to the cottage, correct?" I asked the question that was on everyone's minds.

"I am."

He raised his brows as if he thought he had reminded me of that fact earlier.

I listened, everyone! He said he would return to the cottage! Everything was fine, I mumbled to myself, my internal rhythm thrown off by his presence in the manor.

Er, um.

Ahem.

At any rate, everyone went to see Mr. Fisalis off when he returned to the cottage.

"I'm off," Mr. Fisalis said, looking back before he went out the door that Rohtas held open for him.

"Good night, Master!" replied all the servants in unison, smiling ear to ear.

A most proper sending off! A forty-five degree bow!

“Good night.” Of course, I was wearing a big grin too! A refreshing smile before bed. An invigorating smile before bed. And boy, did I need it after all my hard work that day!

“...Mm, good night...”

What’s that?

Mr. Fisalis’ expression was hard to read, but it was one I hadn’t seen before.

He turned and left, still wearing that unreadable look.

Thud.

The door closed firmly.

Rohtas had stepped out for a moment to see Mr. Fisalis off.

“...well, that was a surprise...” I said with a lowered voice so that they wouldn’t hear me outside.

“It truly was. How many years has it been since Master ate dinner here?” Dahlia whispered.

“I wonder what could have brought that on,” Mimosa said, wonder written plainly across her face.

“Who can say? Maybe it was all just a whim. Phew... I’m beat, though. It’s about time you all had a break. You all must be exhausted, what with Mr. Fisalis’ surprise visit. Let’s get everything cleaned up and put away, and then we can relax.”

“Thank you, Madam,” they replied.

At the end of the day, I still didn’t know why Mr. Fisalis had decided to eat dinner here, but for now, I (and everyone else) was completely exhausted, so I finished the night without thinking about it too deeply.

21 — His Whim Continues

Mr. Fisalis' return to the manor—or rather, his decision to eat dinner there—caused quite a stir among everyone, including myself! It was the hot topic in the servants' dining room the next morning.

"That sure was something yesterday. Some people didn't even get a single break all day, right?" I overheard, looking around at the maids eating breakfast. I was back to eating with everyone, and I was determined to eat only servants' meals from then on.

"I didn't mind missing my break, but I was really feeling all that work in my bones by the end."

That was one of the maids who was at the cottage yesterday, the one assigned to Mr. Fisalis. She shrugged her shoulders with an exasperated look on her face.

"And Miss Calendula didn't know about any of it?"

"It seemed that way, yes. The guard who always escorts Mr. Fisalis came to the cottage and told her around the same time Mr. Fisalis arrived at the main house."

"Oh, I see, I see."

So it wasn't a servant from here that went and told her. Not that we were obligated to, or even had the spare hands on deck to do so.

Mr. Fisalis really had made a spur-of-the-moment decision, then.

"We clean up after her, but she won't even talk to us—she hasn't done any harm to us or anything, though—but, she seemed unhappy about eating dinner alone."

"She purposefully squeaked and clanked her cutlery, and flat out pushed away dishes she didn't like without saying anything. It was a bad look, for sure."

"I agree!"

The personal maid from the cottage went on and on with her complaints.

I felt overwhelmed by the air of restlessness moving through the room, but knew I should stifle any grumbling. "Taking your anger out on someone is never okay, but I think I can understand how she feels. Food just doesn't taste as good when you're eating alone... right?" I interjected with determination.

I mean, I'm only eating here because I hate being alone, too... ha ha.

"We pretend not to see her, too, so I don't see what the problem is," one of the personal maids calmly asserted.

“That’s—that’s right.” Her response was so straightforward it was almost unladylike. I cringed reflexively.

“It’s like someone took away her favorite toy, isn’t it? Even though she usually doesn’t seem all that attached to him. Maybe Master’s the one who’s head over heels for her.”

As the maid vented her thoughts on Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend, I realized the two of them were locked in a tricky balancing act. I had wondered if the two of them were kind of co-dependent, but now it seemed to be otherwise. Anyone could see that Mr. Fisalis was in too deep, but even though it appeared Calendula was less attached to him... I got the vague feeling she was in over her head, too.

That extraordinary event, however, was not limited to just that day.

“Eh? You’re going to eat here today, too?”

The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Uh, what?

He must have been slightly hurt by my response, because then Mr. Fisalis asked, “Can’t I?” with raised eyebrows.

“Of course you can; it’s no trouble at all,” I assured him, nodding my head.

Watch it, you almost showed your true feelings.

It had been a week since that surprise dinner. This was his idea, coming home here after work for the evening meal.

Given this was the second occurrence, no one was quite as panicked as before, and yet...

“Tell Cartham to start dinner!”

When I winked at Rohtas, he gave a little nod that Mr. Fisalis did not notice.

“Arrange for some personal maids to serve the meal!”

I winked at Dahlia.

She nodded back, too.

“Prepare some tea and sweets!”

Mimosa was last.

She stealthily, but sure enough, signaled back a ‘yes.’

There wasn’t going to be an emergency meeting like last time.

We quickly confirmed with each other what we needed to do and then dispersed to our stations.

When we finished our high-speed, undiscussed, full-power-mode dinner, and after I gave him my highly-edited version of What I Did Today, Mr. Fisalis went back to the cottage.

We all saw him off, smiling whole-heartedly.

But just like before, he had that unreadable look on his face. For some reason, it didn’t bother me all that much. But...

What did bother me, more than his expression, was what the

personal maids from the cottage said that day.

Miss Calendula was in a bad mood again. And if she's in a foul mood again, maybe tomorrow, once we hear their complaints we can cheer up the maids from the cottage!

At first it was once a week.

Then, it gradually increased to two or three times a week.

As you might expect, we grew used to him coming home to eat dinner like this and were able to prepare ahead of time. So, the moment he would mention that he was coming to the manor for dinner, we were able to respond quickly without having to resort to winks and secret signals.

The nights when the servants needed to prepare dinner for Mr. Fisalis and myself, and gather some maids to serve it, secretly earned the name "The Cercis Shift." You could almost hear the servants silently calling, "the Cercis Shift is starting!"

Of course, his frequent dinners at the house angered *her*: Miss Calendula, Mr. Fisalis' 'companion' back at the cottage.

This time, she showed up when I happened to be cleaning the entryway.

"Oh, you again? Oh, well. I've come to see Madam Fisalis, so let her know I'm here, will you?"

Sigh.

What high horse did you ride in here on? Who does she think she is!? 'Queen Calendula,' clearly.

Yup.

It didn't seem like she realized who I was this time around, either, and she treated me like just another servant. She had no idea that the plain girl with the braids, uniform, and bare face (okay, I was actually doing the no-makeup look), right in front of her, was actually the lady of the house.

Today, Miss Calendula was wearing a deep crimson dress the same shade as her eyes. The neckline of the dress showed off her bouncing bosom and, ahem, brick house of a body; and that, combined with her black hair that reached her lower back, made for an utterly bewitching bombshell of a woman. Beauty and allure seemed to waft from her, like fragrance from a flower; I couldn't help but stare.

She had an impressive look of determination in her ruby eyes, however, and despite the perfect upward curve to her smile, she was terrifying! *You mustn't glare at a mere servant such as myself!*

"The-the madam. Right away. One moment, please."

Even though I *was* the madam, I faltered and stuttered under her intense gaze.

For now, I'll just go ask Rohtas for advice. Yeah, that's a good idea.

They can keep the fighting between themselves. I, on the other hand, want to avoid a showdown!

So I went to Rohtas' office to speak with him.

"Rohtas! Mr. Fisalis' girlfriend is back at the entrance again."

"Is she here?"

Rohtas was cool and collected as ever when he looked up from the document he was currently fighting with. He pushed his silver-rimmed glasses up on the bridge of his nose with a gentle movement. "What do you mean, 'is she here?' Did you call for her, Rohtas?" I asked, not understanding how he could be so calm.

The edges of his eyes softened, and a small laugh slipped out. "Of course not! It's simply that Master has been eating dinner here more and more frequently. I was more or less able to surmise the state of affairs over at the cottage based on what the personal maids told me," Rohtas answered, as if there wasn't a diva glaring like a demon just outside his doorway.

Those maids are practically pulling off a whole recon mission! The housemaids see everything, don't they!?

"Ohh, I see." I was shocked; I had no clue they did that.

"Yes, she has been in a terrible mood as of late, so I expected her to eventually come here."

"That makes sense!"

A level-headed analysis based on a report.

On top of things as al— Never mind.

"It would probably be best if you do not make an appearance, yet, Madam. I will take care of her again today."

"Fine by me! I'll find somewhere to hide and watch!"

"..."

Hey, come on, now. It's for research material afterwards!

I have no idea what I'd do if she busted in and Rohtas wasn't around, though. I wonder if Dahlia would deal with her for me.

Rohtas hurried briskly toward the entrance, with me quietly at his heels.

I secured a position where I was just out of range of Miss Calendula (I'd be toast if she saw me), and set my sights on her and Rohtas.

"My humble apologies for making you wait," Rohtas said. His face, which had been gentle mere moments before, was now expressionless as he announced himself to her.

"What's this? I said I wanted to see Madam Fisalis. What's the butler doing here?" Miss Calendula was smiling, but yet again, the smile did not reach her eyes.

"That little maid is absolutely useless!" I heard her whisper over her shoulder. She even tutted exaggeratedly!

“Madam is in poor health today, so she is in bed until further notice.”

Woah, Rohtas lied without batting an eye! I'm freaking out over here.

“Oh my, how terrible. I should go check on her.” Miss Calendula didn't back down.

She shot a defiant look Rohtas' way, a smile spreading across her face.

“She has a slight fever, so unfortunately, only her attendants are allowed in her room at the moment.”

“I see. That is unfortunate. I'll be back when she's feeling better, then.” Calendula backed down, unexpectedly disappointed.

Perhaps annoyed at Rohtas' blank expression in the face of her insistence, Calendula clucked her tongue.

She didn't say anything out loud, but her face conveyed a loud and clear *damn it*.

Rohtas, however, was stubbornly cool-headed.

“We would be ever so grateful if you did.”

Calendula glared at Rohtas' blank expression until she left, her crimson dress fluttering as she made her exit.

Today's little cold war ended with another victory for Rohtas.

“I wonder if she'll really come back again.”

Since I had a clear line of sight to the door, I came out from my hiding spot once Calendula left and I was sure the door was shut.

When he looked up, Rohtas' expression had returned to its normal, kind state. “Probably, yes.”

“So, what're we gonna do for the next battle!?”

She won't confront me if I'm dressed like a servant, so maybe I could have Mimosa apply some prosthetics and... no, what am I thinking, going around in disguise in my own house!?

I must have looked like I was planning something, because Rohtas turned to me with a dry look and muttered, “...please refrain from doing anything... strange.”

Who? Me?

22 — Potentially Attending a Party

Mr. Fisalis' peculiar whim persisted, and after about a month had passed, he was coming to the manor almost every day.

I wondered if everything was okay at the cottage. It was none of my business what went on between him and his girlfriend, but I was worried about the maids there. I hoped they weren't getting too stressed out.

Rohtas was usually the only one who went out to greet Mr. Fisalis when he came home. When Rohtas headed to the entrance for his updates when Mr. Fisalis returned, Dahlia and Mimosa would call for me.

It's more proper for the Master to be greeted by the entire staff, I suppose, but our situation was... special, I guess? Following his and Rohtas' 'networking session,' Mr. Fisalis would leave to go to the cottage, so he'd told everyone ages ago that they didn't all have to come out to greet him.

That's right, Mr. Fisalis did that. *The Mr. Cercis Tinensis Fisalis.* I guess he just dispensed with the formalities for once.

The other servants were busy getting dinner ready and doing all kinds of other chores, but recently, now that he'd been coming to the main house, they would wait around the entrance to catch a glimpse of him. Because depending on what he said, there might be a shift change!

Upon hearing the words, "I'll be eating here," the silent call of "starting Cercis Shift!" could be heard throughout the manor.

And of course, the only one who was unaware of this was the man himself.

Ignorance is bliss, I guess.

One morning, at breakfast in the servants' dining hall, out of nowhere I asked, "I wonder, why did Mr. Fisalis suddenly start coming here?" over my delicious salad.

Why, indeed.

With his sudden decision to eat dinner at the main house, I was down to eating only breakfast and lunch with the servants. I was rather heartbroken over this.

We had our High Speed Supper in the main dining room. For some reason, it was bizarre to see two people eating in dead silence, so lately the conversation among the servants had turned to why he

had come back to the main house at all.

Rather, his return was the only thing they had to talk about.

“Wasn’t he fighting with his companion?” Mimosa said offhandedly as she tore into her bread.

“She’s been in an awful mood lately, for sure,” Mr. Fisalis’ personal maid.

“She doesn’t vent her anger out on us, but she does take it out on objects, and just seems really tense overall.”

“Oh, that’s not a good sign. I’m glad I haven’t been attending to the Master lately.”

“It’s made working here more fun, so I can’t complain.”

“Same,” they all agreed.

There were many things to consider, it seemed.

Mr. Fisalis’ personal maid was complaining more and more lately. But the issue was mostly limited to the cottage. To be a personal maid on duty meant being dealt a short straw in some sense, but conversely, you could take it easy on your days off!

“What goes on at the cottage, stays at the cottage; but no matter where we’re stationed, let’s go at our own pace,” I suggested.

There’s no reason to be affected by what’s going on over there! In fact, letting myself be affected by it actually goes against the contract!

“Yes, Madam,” everyone agreed. Lately, it felt like we had formed a strange little union.

That night, the moment when Mr. Fisalis took his seat at the dining table, Rohtas and the serving maids brought out the soup, as usual.

That day was another Super Sonic Supper.

Go, Team Kitchen!

Also, as was the norm, Mr. Fisalis wore an expression suggesting that he was suspicious about or unhappy with the fast service.

“Rohtas, serve the meals more slowly from now on. Let Cartham know, too,” Mr. Fisalis broke his silence to ask Rohtas, who had just stepped back after serving him his soup.

“Is it really that fast?” Rohtas quipped back, without the slightest change in his expression.

“Yes, it is. We haven’t the time to savor anything or have a conversation.”

“Oh, I see,” replied Rohtas, sullenly feigning ignorance.

A-ha. We’ve been found out, at last.

And here Cartham and his team put in so much hard work and were so mindful in their speedy approach to dinner.

Dang it.

...Ah, I’ve gotten all worked up.

But, Mr. Fisalis is the head of the house for now, right? So his orders

hold more weight than my directions. Rohtas and the others are compelled to obey him.

But, we also don't have to eat slowly, right? ...jeez, I'm all off-kilter again.

"Yes, do it that way from now on."

"As you wish, Master."

I was listening to Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas' conversation like it wasn't my problem, but then I suddenly came back to myself.

Um... what the heck should we talk about today, then? It's too late to think of something now... I don't know the details of his work or any of his hobbies, and I'm not exactly up on the latest gossip, considering I never leave the manor.

This isn't good.

In the end though, I had no need to worry: even when the food was brought out slower, it only left just the slightest bit of time between dishes, not much of a change at all. The conversation began only after dessert was over, as it always had.

Phew.

"So how was your day?" Mr. Fisalis began our usual by-the-book conversation.

"Well, since it was raining, I had a dance lesson with Rohtas."

Indeed.

We resumed the rainy day schedule, as we always did.

Of course, my lesson was followed by a full treatment by my own personal Spa Squad! Which I humbly omitted from my end of the conversation.

"Oh, I see. Is Rohtas a good instructor?" Mr. Fisalis asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes." *You might even say he's one hell of a coach.*

I was grateful for my dancing lessons (which were, in all honesty, close to a bootcamp) for correcting my day-to-day posture and movements, but my whole body was stiff today.

"Oh, so that's why the flowers in the entrance didn't get switched out today," he commented.

Mr. Fisalis was looking right at me with those gorgeous dark brown eyes of his. I was confused. *Huh? The flowers in the entrance?* He said it so casually I didn't even register it, and I cocked my head, looking back at him blankly.

"They're the same as yesterday," he said, lowering his eyes and bringing his tea cup to his lips.

Oh, so what he wanted to say was that yesterday's flowers in the entrance hadn't been changed out! After a few moments, I finally figured it out. It had been raining that day, so I had my dance lesson and didn't go out to the greenhouse; then since I got my massage

afterwards, I never swapped out the flowers. More importantly, I was amazed that Mr. Fisalis noticed something as simple as not changing the flowers in the entryway! He wouldn't have seen something as minor as that if he hadn't thought to check.

But you know, I'm a little pleased that he paid any attention to those flowers!

"Oh, er, yes, they are. I was so busy today that I didn't get a chance to go see Bellis."

"I see," he hmph'd and drained his cup.

And that put an end to our conversation.

Hmm? Does Mr. Fisalis dislike Bellis? When the topic switched to Bellis, I sensed his mood turn sour. Perhaps there's some feelings of rivalry between them, as two handsome men? Bellis isn't the kind of guy to care, though, so that would mean it's a one-sided thing on Mr. Fisalis' part.

I finished my tea in silence and placed the cup back on the saucer.

"I hope you have a good night, then," he said coldly before leaving for the cottage.

When I showed up in the servants' dining hall for breakfast the next morning, Cartham ran over to me.

"Madame, I am terribly sorry. I had no choice but to space out the courses at dinner last night. I couldn't refuse Master's order," he said as he nimbly took my hand and gave it a kiss.

It was a firm kiss, too! On top of such an over-the-top expression of grief! Ever the smooth operator. I've learned to let it go, but still. I guess I've finally gotten used to him!

Pulling my hand back from him with no hurt feelings, I said, "It's not your fault, Cartham. I'm not worried about it. Oh, but... from now on, I'll actually have to talk to him."

Why do I feel like I'm being forced into it, though? What do I do, just try my best and have a good time talking with him? Seems like an advanced level technique.

Seeing me grow depressed at the thought of what lay ahead, Cartham winked at me and said, "I won't go as fast as before, but I'll give you as much time as I'm able."

"Oh gosh, thank you! I'll try to use it wisely." I splendidly ignored his wink, but he did seem earnest.

Mr. Fisalis went on with his routine of dining with me every night and then going back to the cottage. And without fail, everyone wished him a good night in a way that felt like we were congratulating one another's hard work. The servants always sent him off with straight-A-worthy smiles.

By this point, Calendula had invited herself into the house a number of times.

At first she managed to force herself to smile, but lately she didn't

even try to hide that she was in a bad mood.

She never caught me, I guess, because in her head she had already categorized me as just a 'useless little girl.' Rohtas would simply call for Dahlia.

She hadn't the slightest idea that I was actually the lady of the house. So long as I was in my uniform, I was just an exceedingly normal young girl of next to no merit.

Would she call me a 'homewrecker' if she knew I was the duchess? I'd kind of like to hear that hard-hitting, cutthroat phrase just once in my life.

If I was saying it, however, it would probably come out more like, "You and your big dog are a real pain in my neck! You need to keep him on a shorter leash!"

For now, though, we aren't at war with each other. Rohtas, capable as he is, always manages to fend her off at the door for me.

Oh, am I ever indebted to you, Rohtas.

Or more precisely, if Mr. Fisalis has been arguing with her (as the servants at the main house and I surmise), now is not the time for him to be showing up at the house every day. In fact, he ought to be returning to the cottage after work to smooth things over with her.

But...

Contrary to our expectations, Mr. Fisalis continued on with his impulsive actions, which only made the problem worse.

One day, after I'd hurried to the entrance upon hearing he was home, he handed me an envelope.

"What's this?"

I accepted it with suspicion, but acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. It was a white envelope that felt like it was made of fine paper. It was addressed in elegant calligraphy to 'Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis.'

It was clearly meant for Mr. Fisalis, and when I turned it over, I saw that it was sealed with gold beeswax.

I looked up at Mr. Fisalis in shock when I realized the letter had come from the royal family. Even someone like me, with no connections to speak of, would recognize their famous coat of arms!

"It's an invitation from the royal palace. They will be holding a party one evening soon, and you and I are invited," he told me, smiling faintly.

"Huh!? An evening party?"

I blinked repeatedly, stunned.

Um, the contract said I didn't have to socialize. And a fancy soiree definitely counts as socializing. I didn't know what to think, so I stared back at him blankly.

"Er, yes. So, will you come with me?" he asked with a gentle smile, like it was no big deal.

“Erm, I think that can be arranged,” I answered, before I could really think it over.

23 — The Evening Party

How did I end up going to an evening party? And one thrown by the royal family, no less! I'm embarrassed to say it, but the first time I ever set foot in the palace was my wedding reception.

Since my parents kept socializing to a minimum, I only went out a few times. They didn't have the time or money to take me places.

"It can 'be arranged?'" Mr. Fisalis didn't seem to understand what I meant, his face broadcasting "taken aback" loud and clear.

"Yes... In our initial conversation, I do believe you said that I didn't have to attend social functions," I said, explaining what I meant earlier.

He'd told me that I didn't have to go to social events when he explained the details of the contract, so going to an evening party would definitely count as an amendment to that contract.

The Fisalis family was of noble blood, so to this day they are invited to many a soiree and social event.

(Source: Mimosa)

But Mr. Fisalis had been taking Miss Calendula with him when he attended.

(Source: Dahlia)

I wondered why he didn't just do the same thing now, but the fact that he was still eating dinner here suggested that he hadn't made up with her yet. Consequently, it seemed that not being able to invite Calendula meant 'just bring Viola' instead.

In other words, I thought, now is a great time for Mr. Fisalis to make up with her, unless... he's already squandered his chance?

I was too cowardly to cut right to the chase and ask straight up, 'are you fighting with your girlfriend,' so instead I politely asked, "Oh, um, can't your girlfriend go?"

"She, er..." he answered evasively.

"Is she not feeling well?" I pressed further. *She has certainly seemed in good health whenever she stormed the main house, but let's set that aside.*

"Er, yes. That's about right," he evaded further, his eyes looking anywhere but at me.

Now I know they're fighting!

But, thinking about it a little more, this was an invitation to an official royal soiree, not some private get-together at a noble's

mansion. It would be in poor taste to bring Miss Calendula to an official function like this.

It made perfect sense, then, that Mr. Fisalis had no choice but to come to me and my family.

Which is why he can't actually answer me now!

Social events weren't included in the contract, but playing the part of show wife certainly was, so it seemed I had no choice but to resign myself to my fate and accept the invitation.

That satisfied me somewhat, so I looked up straight into his dark brown eyes and replied, "Alright. When is it?" with a firm nod.

"Two weeks from now."

His gaze softened in relief at my confirmation.

If it's two weeks away, I have time. But wait, time to do what?

Prepare! I have so much to prepare!

"Understood. Mimosa, I'll have something to wear, right?"

I turned around at his response to confirm with Mimosa, who was still waiting behind me.

There were still tons of dresses in my dressing room that I hadn't worn yet! Just like I said I would do in the beginning, I had only been wearing the comfortable, simple ones in heavy rotation.

Of course, that meant completely ignoring Mimosa's bitter glares.

My undeniable favorite, though, was my uniform.

"Oh, you'll be just fine, Madam."

"And accessories, too?"

"Of course." She nodded with a smile. "Hehehe, get ready to take accessorizing to the extreme!" I could almost hear her cackling internally. At the sight of her manic smile, I began to worry what kind of insane makeup she'd put on me.

Mr. Fisalis listened silently to our exchange before suggesting with a bright smile, "No, I'll give you a new dress, since I'm the one who asked this of you." When I heard that, I suddenly froze.

Whaaat? An even newer dress than these? Even though I already have heaps of new dresses?

"Don't be absurd! I have plenty of dresses that were here for me when I arrived, and they're still good as new! And the heaps of dresses you gave me after you proposed make for more than enough. I'll choose from those. Same for my accessories. It'd just be a waste to buy something brand new!"

Moreover, everything was very clearly quite delicate and elaborate—to put it simply, they were luxury items made from the highest quality fabrics! And he wanted me to get me something totally brand new!?

And speaking of a lack of money sense, there seemed to be a massive, unbridgeable gap in common sense between the two of us.

Giving me a sidelong glance as I fiercely protested, Mimosa turned to Mr. Fisalis and replied in a happy tone, "As you wish, Master. I'll arrange for a tailor right away!"

I had never once seen her obey an order from him with such a big grin on her face!

In complete contrast to my expression of stunned amazement, Mr. Fisalis turned to Mimosa and gave her a single nod of satisfaction. Then, he turned to Dahlia, who was standing next to her, and offhandedly instructed her, "I want her to have new jewelry to match, as well. I'll leave that to you, Dahlia."

"Very well, Master," she replied, obedient as ever.

No no no! Hold on! The conversation just keeps going on while I'm stuck here mute from shock!

"Pl-Please, wait a minute! I have a whole lot of jewelry I haven't even worn yet!"

No waste! No excess! Resist luxury!

The three of them completely ignored me to discuss making arrangements with craftsmen and traders as I continued, in full panic mode.

They won't change their minds. I feel like I'm being left behind.

"Argh, why did it have to be an evening party? I don't need a new dress! And I told you, I barely even wear jewelry!" I rolled back and forth in mental anguish on my sofa as I vented true feelings, unable to maintain appearances any longer.

More than having to go to the party and whatnot, it was the waste of money that made me lose my temper. But what should I have expected from someone born with a silver spoon in his mouth!?

"His companion is always getting new dresses and jewelry, so I wish he'd give you more! You'd be within your rights to ask for more, even!" Mimosa said, and when I looked at her, I saw her sneering.

It was a dark smile.

"Well, aren't you full of information," I shot back.

"Of course I am. I heard it from Master's personal maids."

Ah-ha. There's been an information leak.

"And then there's the bills," Dahlia added nonchalantly.

Normally I'd be terrified by her blank expression.

"R-really? Mr. Fisalis is always going to evening parties with his girlfriend, though." I was repeating myself, but we had been married for four months, and I was sure there had been plenty of evening parties during that time. Throwing soirees and tea parties was as normal as breathing for nobles, after all.

"That's correct. However, due to his busy schedule, Master has only been able to attend two or three a month," Dahlia answered.

As I had expected, the head personal maid knew the fine details of Mr. Fisalis' schedule.

"And did he go to soirees at the royal palace with her, too?"

"Until now, he's always gone to events either alone or as an escort to his childhood friend Duchess Verbena Argenteia. There are rules in place for events thrown by the royal family."

"Really?"

It was the first I'd heard of this childhood friend, but I guess this time... she couldn't make it. I nodded along as she spoke, but then both of them glided over to me.

"So please, you'd better not feel bad about a brand new dress and jewelry."

"You ought to be excited."

They smiled at me.

Their smiles were *terrifying*.

The moment I shuffled back to get away from them, I nearly fell off the sofa.

24 — Getting Ready

With nowhere left to run, I gave in and set about preparing for the soiree the very next day.

Well, I say that, but getting a new dress was no easy feat.

My parents had given me a dress when I'd debuted, but it was off the rack, not custom-made. Same for the dresses given to me as engagement gifts and the ones that were prepared for me at the manor after I got married.

Meaning, this would be my first time ever having a dress custom-made.

A super famous haute couture madam from the capital, one so famous that even someone as untrendy as me knew who she was, personally came and measured me. I had heard from someone that this designer had a six-month waiting list for her dresses, but his VIP designer came rushing over the very next day. I worried that she might think I was self-important, since she was so famous and owned a popular shop, but...

"Goodness gracious, what a cute little lady you are! You're so slim and have a nice figure, so it'll really be worth my while to make a dress for you!" the madam told me as a gentle smile blossomed across her face like a flower. She was a kind middle-aged woman with gorgeous silver blonde hair.

Phew.

But what part of my flat chest and boyish hips did she mistake for a 'nice figure?' She's impressed by the strangest things.

Oh, she was probably just being nice. That must be it.

Taking my measurements was the first step.

It was a little embarrassing to be measured in my underwear, from head to toe—Arms up! Look back! Everything perfect and exact!—in front of the madam, Dahlia, Mimosa, and a few other personal maids. It was like some sort of erotic humiliation scene.

And when that was done, the next step was the design.

This was Mimosa's forte, whereas I didn't know much about fashion design at all.

"Something that will show off Madam Fisalis' innocent charm..."

"Something fitted and refined would suit her, since she's tall..."

They discussed the finer points of what I ought to wear, and then the madam roughed out a design based on their conversation.

I was fascinated by her ability to draw so quickly without having it look rushed. More than the idea of the dress I was to wear, I was impressed by her skill.

Once the design was finalized for the time being, we moved on to the fabric.

The high quality silk felt the best under my hand, buttery soft and smooth, and I certainly had no qualms over how light it was.

We'll use this liberally. It's very expensive (as expected).

I was utterly spellbound by its exquisite texture, and it was a flawless light blue in color.

I wonder why she chose it...

~A Sudden Memory: A Conversation the Day Before~

"About my clothes..." Mr. Fisalis said, as he was instructing Dahlia and Mimosa on the preparation of my dress and jewelry. It seemed as if he had something to say about his own clothes.

"About that—there's something you had made earlier but have not worn yet. It was supposed to be for another soiree that ended up overlapping with official business, so you did not attend," Dalia said with an air of calm.

"Ah, yes. You're right," agreed Mr. Fisalis.

"What if you wore that, Master? Madam's dress can match it."

"...sure."

Something about Dahlia made it hard to tell her no, and so Mr. Fisalis' outfit took mere seconds to determine.

According to what she told me later, a sudden business trip had come up and Mr. Fisalis had been unable to go to the party. Once she'd mentioned it, I recalled a similar business trip around the time we were to be married.

Gosh, I really did completely forget about him back then.

And so ends our trip down memory lane.

In other words, if he was going to wear something he already owned, so could I. There was bound to be a coordinating dress in my dressing room.

But just as I said so, Dahlia and Mimosa closed in on me wearing frightful grins and cackling, "We'll get something maaade." I surrendered.

So, since Mr. Fisalis' outfit was light blue, this would make for a coordinating dress, just as Dahlia had suggested.

I didn't really see why we had to match, though.

Won't we look like one of those annoying couples that gives you secondhand embarrassment? It'll totally look like we're overcompensating and just pretending to be in love.

Oh. Wait.

When she and Mimosa had finished their planning, the madam said, “Now, to show you what I can do!” and left for her shop excitedly.

There was no time to waste, however; jewelry was next. And like the dressmaker, the owner of a famous jewelry store in the capital came to see me.

The weight the Fialis name carried really was something else.

I was reminded of that fact multiple times that day.

Since my dress wasn’t finished yet, we described the style and color to him, to which he replied, “Hmm, yes, I see.” He was rummaging through the case he had brought with him when he suddenly said, “How about this one?” and pulled out a hefty crimson velvet box.

When he opened the box, my eyes were dazzled by the brilliance that lay inside.

Setting the box aside, what appeared from inside was a splendid mix of sapphires and diamonds. And as if the gems themselves were not enough, the necklace had so *many* of them.

“Please, try it on,” the jeweler said, handing it to me like it was some trinket. His hands shook as he did, though, due to how valuable it was. *Does he really expect me to take this?* I thought to myself, hesitating.

“Let’s see how it looks on you,” Mimosa said, taking it in my place and resting it against my décolletage.

Thanks for having my back, again, Mimosa!

There was no denying it was beautiful when I looked in the mirror. I was sad to see that it was almost *too* beautiful, though, and made my face look flat by comparison.

How depressing.

I was sulking quietly to myself, and even though I didn’t say anything to the jeweler and just stared silently into the mirror, he said, “It would be unfair to compare these to gems from the duchy, but this is made with stones equal to those from other kingdoms. You have excellent taste, Madam, just as I suspected!”

He misunderstood my silence for dissatisfaction with the gems.

I wouldn’t have been able to tell if the stones were from here or elsewhere anyway!

I forced myself to smile in the wake of his error and said, “It really suits me!”

Mimosa looked back at me with a smile and agreed, “It certainly brings out the color of your eyes, Madam. It looks amazing.”

Dahlia smiled, too, and commended the jeweler. “We had other necklaces too, but I think this one is the right choice.”

...it certainly does feel expensive. Same for the dress.

Yeah, I'm better off not asking how much it costs. I'm sure I'd faint at the response if I did.

"...I'll go with this, then..."

It's not as if it's coming out of my pocket!

I'd made my decision.

I realized then that it was already evening; preparing a dress and jewelry had taken the whole day.

I knew it was poor manners to sprawl out on the sofa in my room, but Dahlia and Mimosa weren't watching, so it was fine.

I suspected they'd let me shut my eyes for a moment anyway after such a demanding day.

"Darn it, I didn't get anything done today. No cleaning, or decorating, or gardening."

I didn't even get to wear my uniform at all today.

"Well, sometimes you just have days like this," Mimosa snickered as she placed a steaming hot cup of tea in front of me.

"I had no idea going to a soiree was this much work."

What did I do about evening parties up until then, you may wonder. Well, I could count the number of social events I'd attended on one hand. Since I was a noble, I couldn't just wear one of my regular old dresses, but on the other hand, we didn't have the money to get new clothes for every party, so we had to do what we could, like mixing and matching accessories and dresses so they looked like different outfits.

It was no easy task, but it was nowhere near as exhausting as this.

Was I just not motivated enough?

"Maybe we ought to make time for dance and etiquette lessons, instead of housework," suggested a voice jokingly, but with a decisive undertone.

Who said that!?

When I glanced behind Mimosa, where the voice originated, I spotted Dahlia. She was wearing a wide grin.

I was beginning to sense a pattern.

No matter how much I argued, I always ended up studying.

I gulped in terror.

I seemed to be choking on Dahlia's words as well as her smile.

"Leave your rest and relaxation to me!" Mimosa charged in my direction, as if she were attacking a retreating enemy, with a smile rivaling Dahlia's and a clenched fist.

What's with all this? The evening party was just an option I agreed to after I signed the contract.

Why does everyone seem so excited by this?

25 — Roll Out!

My dress was finished a week later.

According to the madam, my order was given the highest priority.

I really didn't like the feeling that I was throwing my financial weight around, though.

She summed up my completed dress and the matching accessories I had purchased as "absolutely stunning!"

It was a pity that I was going to be the one modeling them, then.

It was now one week until the party.

I had the art of dance thoroughly drilled into me during the mornings by Rohtas, and was massaged, steamed, and squeezed by the Spa Squad in the afternoons. The result of everyone's time spent bettering me—the fruits of their labor, I guess—was that I had come to resemble something of a respectable young wife.

That resemblance was entirely subjective, though.

Since I was so stressed from being sashayed and squished and squeezed all day, I begged the servants to let me do housework.

At that point, Rohtas and Dalia understood that this was just who I was.

And then... I was ready, and the day of the party finally arrived.

Since I wanted to avoid things that would wear me out right before I charged into battle, I had the Spa Squad take it easy on me. Afterwards, Mimosa applied my makeup and I felt like a new woman. *No stiff robotic movements, today!*

"You look all the more stunning today, Madam!" Mimosa said, and I could see her eyes twinkling in the mirror as she stood behind me.

I sure know *I* was surprised by how I looked.

Rather than looking like the textbook example of poor fashion sense and mediocrity, as I usually did, what I saw in the mirror was a graceful young lady—nay, a young *wife*!

It was a complete and glorious transformation, if I do say so myself.

If I'd had before and after pictures, I'm certain people would have thought they were of two different girls.



“You really didn’t hold back, Mimosa! This is amazing. I look like a different person.”

The more I looked, the harder it was to believe it was really me.

I was born with hooded eyelids, but my eyes aren’t actually that big. Now, though, they looked wide open. Oh, the power of eyeshadow!

My lips were normally nothing to write home about, either, but now they were full and glossy, and with a charming sparkle.

I’ll have to be careful not to eat anything so I don’t rub off the lipstick!

The eye catching corsage on the bust of my mermaid-style dress hid my flat chest. And although the frills that cascaded from around my hips down to the hem accentuated my youthfulness, they actually functioned to make my hips look bigger, too.

Overall it was a simple yet glamorous look. The dress was truly a testament to the madam’s skill.

“I really didn’t put that much makeup on you. You’re already so naturally pretty that I didn’t have to,” Mimosa pouted cutely in response to my subdued reaction.

“Then I’ll just say it again! Your makeup skills are outstanding, Mimosa. There’s no need to be modest about it!”

As Mimosa and I got into a discussion about this, Dahlia chimed in with, “No, the beauty is all your own, Madam. Here, let me put this on you and you’ll be all set,” as she spun me around and put my jewels on me.

The set consisted of a choker made of diamonds and sapphires delicately woven with platinum threads, along with matching earrings.

I was struck by their glittering beauty and brilliant shine.

Once they were on, this young duchess was truly ready for her night out.

I never said I wasn’t a little shallow.

Just as I finished the last of my preparations, there was a knock on the door.

“Are you ready, Madam? Master has come to collect you,” I heard Rohtas say through the door.

“You look even more lovely than usual,” he said with a gentle smile when he saw me.

“You really think so? I think the dress, the jewelry, and the makeup really had their work cut out for them, making me look like this,” I answered, looking myself up and down in the mirror.

“Not at all. Your dress and everything else are only drawing out your natural beauty,” Rohtas snickered at me, as if I had said something funny.

“I don’t look strange?”

I’m wearing such a high-end dress, I mean, don’t I stand out?

And that would be unbecoming of a duchess.

I’ll be next to my very well-known—not to mention, very good-looking—husband, too.

There’s nothing I can do to turn that comparison in my favor, but even so, I want to try as hard as I can. But at the end of the day, I’m only an ordinary girl from a penniless noble family, so I just have no confidence in myself.

This is still nerve-wracking for me.

“There’s nothing strange about you at all. One might easily mistake you for a princess from some foreign kingdom!” Rohtas joked with me. He read me like a book, but his casual manner relaxed me.

He led the way to the entrance where Mr. Fisalis was already waiting for me. He looked great normally, but he was so dazzling all dressed up for the party that I wished he’d share some of that sparkle with me.

Any normal girl would swoon if she could see him right now.

And with our matching outfits, when the two of us stood side by side, there would be no denying that we were a real couple.

“My word, you look beautiful today!”

I was making my first appearance after what I could only describe as a total transformation. Mr. Fisalis gazed at me in wonder.

Shouldn’t that be “today, as well” not just “today”?

But whatever, once a plain Jane, always a plain Jane.

“Oh, this is just the fruit of all my maids’ labor. I did my best to look as good as you, but I’m worried I just look strange.”

“Strange! That dress looks stunning on you. I’m the one being upstaged, I think.”

Sufficiently recovered from his shock, Mr. Fisalis looked me over from head to toe, and then smiled in what looked like satisfaction. I got the impression that he was highly skilled in controlling his gaze so that he didn’t come off as dirty or rude.

“Thank you for giving me this wonderful dress and accessories.”

I swallowed my desire to continue with, “If possible, I’d like to avoid extravagant purchases like these in the future.”

Just tell him ‘thank you.’

“I’d be happy to give you more, if you’d like,” he told me with an even more brilliant smile, in a complete one-eighty from my wimpy response.

Really, though, I don’t need any more!

“Oh, heheh, there’s no need for that!” *Just laugh it off.*

“I do believe it is getting late,” Rohtas commented, breaking his silence. He had been quietly listening to us chat, but now he urged us

to move along.

Dahlia gently covered me in a cape to keep out the night winds.

“Oh, so it is. Let’s be on our way.” Mr. Fisalis said, extending his hand to me.

So, the performance had already begun.

Very well.

“Yes, let’s go.”

I obliged and took his hand in mine.

This would be my first soiree at the royal palace. I was starting to get a bit excited, wondering what it would be like.

Bring it on, mean girls! You want Mr. Fisalis so bad? Well... you can have him!

“I’m looking forward to having a good time at the party,” Mr. Fisalis commented.

I sat across from him in the carriage on the way to the castle. I was sitting in silence, nervous as I was, when he spoke up.

“I’ll do my best to make sure you do,” I replied back. When I’d finished my last dance lesson, Rohtas had said, “If you can dance this well, you’ll be just fine,” apparently giving me his seal of approval. Considering that I looked pretty darn good with this makeup on, I figured that I’d make it through the night, one way or another.

The carriage slowly passed under the palace gate, and we got out.

And what a palace it was: all shining and sparkling. I had to cover my eyes and nearly stumbled into a wall. And it wasn’t just the fault of the lights and decorations. All of the people present glittered and shone. Everyone seemed to look like they were made of light.

Someone, help! I’m going blind! Bring me some solar eclipse glasses!

“Duke and Duchess Fisalis have arrived.” No sooner had I gotten in line with Mr. Fisalis at the entrance to the party venue than the footman announced our arrival. At that same moment, I shot Mr. Fisalis a glance. He was used to places like these, and so was wearing his usual composed smile. My face, meanwhile, was quite stiff. I could feel my cheeks twitching in shock and confusion.

Oh no, I can practically feel everyone looking at me. It’s like being zapped by dozens of tiny laser beams. This is exactly how I felt at my wedding!

When I glanced around, I saw many young women grouped in pairs, mouths hidden behind folding fans, whispering to each other.

It wasn’t just the young ones either—I spied middle-aged women doing so, too.

It must be because Mr. Fisalis is popular with the ladies, no matter what age! He likes older women, so maybe that includes middle-aged women? I don’t see any in range, though...

“We should say our hellos to his majesty, first,” the man in

question whispered into my ear. He placed a hand near my lower back and escorted me in the right direction.

Oh, that's right! I mustn't forget our little charade, today of all days! I wasn't used to having an arm wrapped around me or wearing matching clothes, however, and was positively embarrassed.

Surrounded by crowds of people on all sides, we made our way toward the throne.

After we were done greeting the royal couple and the guests of honor, free from any mishaps (I was careful to keep my true nature from revealing itself—er, I mean, I was careful to keep my makeup from coming off by keeping food and drink to a minimum!), we passed the time diligently by making conversation with other guests, as was proper.

During this time, Mr. Fisalis wore me on his arm like some sort of handbag—er, rather, I went where he did.

“Commander Fisalis, may I have a word?” a handsome, smartly dressed man called to him when the party was in full swing.

“What? ...Oh, this is my subordinate. Excuse me a moment.”

I introduced myself once he responded to the man, but it would have been difficult to talk in the middle of the crowd, so Mr. Fisalis excused himself and they headed toward the terrace.

Which left me all alone.

I'd never had any interest in socializing, and since I didn't come from as much money as these people, I didn't expect to see anyone here that I knew.

“Back to being a wallflower, I guess,” I concluded to myself after taking a look around. I moved to stand against a wall with my glass in my hand.

I rather liked people-watching... not that it mattered.

But a moment later, I was prevented from leaving my position by a somewhat harsh feminine voice asking me, “You're Duchess Fisalis?”

It's here? Is this it!? Is this the catfight I've been expecting!?

26 — Changes

When I turned around, there were four young women there. I had no idea what families they belonged to, though.

Ladies, it is my utmost pleasure to make your acquaintance.

The one who had called to me was wearing a lovely, fluttery pink dress.

She was standing a step in front of the others, so I guess that meant she was the leader.

Oh. No.

Is this going to turn into a cat fight!? Does that mean one of them's gonna yell, "You have no right to be with the duke" or something!? Why would I think that, you ask? Because situations like that happen so frequently in the popular romance novels I've read that they must be inevitable! In a romance between two people of unequal rank, the helpless heroine finds herself in a spat at some get-together, and is rescued by the dashing hero.

Although the details vary, the routine is essentially the same, and the girl is usually the victim.

...But I'm not like other girls. What's that? Aren't I trembling with fear, you wonder? Nay, don't be absurd!

"Oh, er, yes, I am," I answered nervously, my eyes quivering in fear.

I waited in heart-pounding suspense to see what sort of clichéd line would be thrown at me next.

"Huh! You're even cuter than the rumors made you out to be!"

I gave myself a pat on the back for not toppling over in shock.

"You look so lovely, so I assume your marriage has been worry-free?" one of them asked, anxious, but she sounded like she was hiding something. It was the lady in the pink frills who had called out to me.

She introduced herself as Iris Sanguinea. She must be related to Marquis Sanguinea. Her almond eyes seemed severe at first glance, but were charming when she smiled. Given how smartly dressed and beautiful she looked, she gave the impression of being very fashionable. She said she was two years older than me.

"Oh, sure..." I gave her a strained laugh in response to her difficult question.

It's not so much that my marriage is worry-free as it is that I'm free to

do whatever I want.

Still, if I was a regular girl, my situation would be irresistible. I'm not worried about what other people would do, though, and I'm worse off for it.

"There have been rumors floating around for a while now..." a girl looked at me with upturned eyes, as if it pained her to speak of such things. She was an attractive, plump young lady from the Crocus family. I had kept my eyes on Iris, so I was caught off guard when this new girl suddenly appeared behind me.

If I was the anxious type, this would have been difficult.

I have the servants, so what do I need Mr. Fisalis for? I mean, haven't I been thinking lately that it's a real hassle for everyone to change shifts when he comes over for dinner?

But I carefully stored that thought away deep in my mind and replied, "It's been great. Mr. Fisalis is a real gentleman." I smiled faintly.

I then realized that I was surrounded not by malicious, war-mongering witches, but by kindhearted women.

Huh? Wasn't this supposed to be a fight scene? Where'd the romance novel go?

Deep down, I was confused; this friendly atmosphere was miles away from what I had expected—no, dreaded.

"It's just that, usually when he goes to evening parties, he's escorting someone else."

"And we were concerned about how your relationship was, since he's married."

"We just..."

"We didn't want to interfere, though."

"The duke must be up to something if he's escorting another woman instead of his beautiful wife!"

They argued fervently among themselves.

Oh, I see! They were all in favor of giving me the sympathy vote! Calling me beautiful or cute was just an extreme form of flattery, so I'll brush it off for now.

The women didn't seem as though they had an ulterior motive, so I stayed and chatted with them.

Somehow, everyone knew about Mr. Fisalis going to parties with Miss Calendula.

Therefore, they wanted to keep us at a distance if there was a high chance that Mr. Fisalis wasn't behaving in a seemly fashion, despite being a wealthy, influential duke.

Apparently many people had spoken up, wondering if I was alright with the situation.

Given that we were actually in a contractual marriage for our own

interests, there were no hard feelings to be had, but there was no way they were getting *that* out of me there.

“Ah ha ha ha,” I laughed.

Act like you mean it! I’d been telling myself that a lot.

Oh well... it’s too bad that I missed my chance at a fight scene, but I’m better off without needless fighting.

I had been having a nice talk with the five of them for a while when:

“Oh, Vi, there you are. I was looking for you.” It was Mr. Fisalis heading towards me. I assumed he was done talking with his subordinate.

I had gotten too absorbed in my conversation with the ladies and had forgotten he existed. Again.

What a bad habit of mine!

“I’m sorry, I was having a grand time talking with these wonderful people.”

He made it to where I was in a flash, his long strides carrying him quickly; I then introduced the ladies to him.

It seemed as though he didn’t know any of them. He stood by my side with his arm around me.

“The pleasure is all mine. Thank you for speaking with my wife while I stepped away. I do hope you’ll be her friends.” His face broke into its usual dazzling smile as he spoke.

And let me tell you how those ladies reacted! They were under his spell faster than Mimosa appeared whenever someone mentioned clothes! Mr. Fisalis’ smile truly was the vessel of a great destructive force.

...how typical.

“W-we certainly will!!” Their pupils were practically in the shape of hearts.

If it had been their own husbands, they’d probably say something like, “Slow down there, honey,” but still, you can’t beat their genuine enthusiasm.

They’re only looking out for themselves.

Assuming it was more of the sympathy vote, I went around the party talking with more people, but all I received were favorable responses until I was restlessly looking for anyone who wanted to argue with me.

Looks like romance novels are fiction after all. And here I took the trouble to prepare for a fight.

Shortly after, Mr. Fisalis asked me, “Shall we dance?”

Now that he’s mentioned it, I guess I’ve done nothing but talk, eat, and drink. I haven’t danced at all.

When I first started my dance lessons, I had insisted that I’d never

even go to an event that required dancing, but just as Rohtas demanded, I paid attention to what I was doing, and pulled it off without a hitch.

Good thinking, Rohtas! On top of things as... nope.

After I danced with Mr. Fisalis for a few songs, other men, young and old, came and asked me to dance, one after another.

It would have been rude to turn them down, so I accepted.

I don't recall how many songs I danced for, or how many people I danced with. But I felt like I danced enough for an entire lifetime.

One thing I can say for sure: it was solely due to Rohtas' hellish dance lessons and the stamina I had cultivated doing everyday housework that I finished without embarrassing myself. In fact, they told me I was a really good dancer. I could never thank Rohtas enough!

The whole time that I was dancing with other men, Mr. Fisalis chatted amicably with friends and people he knew from his work, but I caught him glancing at me like he couldn't stop himself. Each time I caught him, he was smiling.

It's okay, I promise I won't mess up! I'll take my job as the capital's ultimate dance partner very seriously!

Just when I thought my back was going to start aching soon, yet another man asked me to dance. Inside, I wanted to turn him down, worn out as I was by the relentless dancing.

"My wife must be quite exhausted by now. I'll take her back," Mr. Fisalis said, taking hold of my waist like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Nice save! What a great way to get me out of dancing with that guy! Thanks!

At long last, I finally sat down. Mr. Fisalis brought me a glass of champagne as I took a much-needed breather.

Hahhh. Champagne really hits the spot after dancing! The fizz doesn't build up inside, so it's like I can feel the bubbles soaking into my whole body! I reveled in the top-shelf champagne the same way a middle-aged man talks about beer.

"You really are exhausted just from some dancing, aren't you?" Mr. Fisalis' deep brown eyes crinkled as he snickered, as if I had done something amusing. He was looking right at me. "Thank you for putting yourself out there. I think it's about time we head home."

Oh, he noticed. He's probably a little embarrassed. He's the kind of person who prefers people to be themselves, though.

"Yes, I'd like that," I replied. Then I sat up a little straighter, fixed my dress, and gracefully finished my champagne.

Socializing was hard work. Not only do you have to keep a smile on your face as you dance and talk, you'll also subject the people you

meet to groundless suspicion, and be constantly on the lookout so as not to be taken by surprise!

"I got the feeling that you knew I wanted to run away so many times back there."

"Eh?" His brown eyes opened wide in surprise.

Oops. I let one of my ol' crazy ideas slip.

"Oh, no, it's nothing. Let's go home."

"...mm, yes."

And with that, our little arrangement was complete!

By the time we arrived back at the manor, it was quite late at night.

"Welcome home." In spite of the late hour, Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa greeted us at the entrance.

Oh, I really feel like I've come home!

"We're back," replied Mr. Fisalis.

"We made it! Sorry it's so late, though," I apologized.

After this, the only thing left to do is bid Mr. Fisalis a good night and go to bed. Our little business meeting will adjourn once he goes back to the cottage, so I only have to hang on for a little bit longer!

Just as I was about to turn to tell him good night, he started to speak before I could get the chance.

"Thank you for tonight. Oh, Rohtas ... it's gotten quite late, so I'll be retiring here tonight. Get a room ready for me."

His words of thanks were to me, and his order to prepare a room for Rohtas, who was standing by.

Whaaat? I must be so exhausted that I'm hearing things!

27 — He's Still Here

What did he just say? ...He's really thrown me for a loop.

I wondered if I finally hit the hallucination stage of physical exhaustion. But when I looked around, Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa were standing in shocked silence, too.

Ah, my old friend, Mr. Shock-and-Bewilderment.

"...Very well." Rohtas recovered before the others.

There in the entrance, I heard a voice in my head yell, "Cercis Shift, Emergency Deployment! To your battlestations!"

The servants were waiting for a signal at the entrance even at this hour! Good job, everyone! This is a different routine than usual, though, so will they be able to pull it off?

"Are you going to turn in already?" Mr. Fisalis asked, turning his gaze from Rohtas to me. I had been absentmindedly listening to the two of them talk when, out of nowhere, I was met with a pair of dark brown eyes... and then I awoke from my apparent daydream.

"Er, yes. I am quite tired."

Let me go, ahead— Ahem.

Er, I mean, I thought we completed that side quest already.

I cocked my head in doubt, wondering what he could possibly come out of his mouth next.

"I see. I was going to have some tea made for us, is all. Ah, well, it is rather late. We'll leave that for later, then. Have a good night." Mr. Fisalis smiled gently. Then he turned to Rohtas and told him, "Rohtas, prepare the tea just for me, then."

I wanted to speak to Dahlia, so I inched over to where she was waiting. "Will you be alright on Cercis Shift?" I whispered in her ear while Mr. Fisalis' attention was elsewhere.

"I dare say we will. I spotted several servants heading upstairs out of the corner of my eye," she answered, hushed.

"I'm so relieved that you waited for us as usual."

Our servants never fail to impress me. They do excellent work.

"Think nothing of it."

"Is something the matter?"

I realized Mr. Fisalis was staring at us with a look of suspicion.

"Oh, uh, nothing! I was just asking Dahlia if she could prepare a hot bath for me! Ah ha ha ha." I laughed awkwardly. *Use Secret Technique: Forced Laughter!*

“Very well, then. Have a good night.”

“Good night to you, too.”

I wasn’t about to turn down the offer to go straight to bed, considering how utterly wiped out I was, so I headed up to my room with Dahlia and Mimosa.

“What a shock that was. We had to assemble the troops all over again because he made another impulsive decision!”

I took off my combat gear—I mean, my formal wear—took a hot bath, and once I was changed into my nightclothes and completely refreshed, dove into my bed with a soft *fwump*. That bed got a ten out of ten for softness. I was well aware that it was bad manners, but neither Dahlia nor Mimosa bothered chiding me about it anymore. Sometimes you just have to give in to immaturity, right? Both the sofa and the bed in here feel so good that I’ve gotten into the bad habit of rolling around and messily sprawling out on them.

More like writhing in mental anguish, most of the time, really, but that’s a different story.

“You’re telling me. My mind went totally blank for a split second.”

“Same here,” Dahlia and Mimosa scoffed.

“I can’t even begin to understand why, but he’s been acting so out of the ordinary lately, hasn’t he?” I asked the two of them as I made myself comfortable in bed.

“More like ‘crazy,’” Mimosa added.

“And it’s been ongoing, too, his unexpected behavior.” Dahlia agreed. Their replies suggested that they, too, were trying to make sense of his intentions.

“Could the fighting with his girlfriend be making the situation worse?”

Based on what I’ve heard from his personal maids, Miss Calendula has a terrible temper. He could at least try to patch things up with her by eating dinner with her every day...but he’s shown no sign that he even wants to, and is in fact spending more and more time at the main house.

“We have never had an issue like this until now...” Dahlia said.

“We had no involvement with what went on in the cottage,” added Mimosa.

“Do you think Mr. Fisalis is even interested in reconciling with his girlfriend? It sure seems like being here so frequently is only going to complicate things even more.”

“It does seem that way,” Mimosa agreed.

“It’s possible, however, that he has some plan in mind. I couldn’t say for sure, though, without seeing more.”

“Right. I agree, Dahlia,” I said, with a yawn. “It sure has been a long day. I hope I’ll be able to get out of bed tomorrow morning.

Wait... is Mr. Fialis going to eat breakfast with me?"

It would make sense to assume that he'd eat breakfast here if he's staying the night.

"Most likely," Dahlia nodded. "Did you have something else in mind, Madam?"

"...it would give a bad impression if I didn't."

I could always 'oversleep' by accident. I looked to Dahlia with upturned eyes.

"Well, I suppose there is no point in forcing yourself..." Dahlia said with a sour smile.

I knew it.

"...okay, I'll eat with him... That means I won't get my precious breakfast with all of you though! Wehhh! And at a time when I can't eat dinner with you, either! In that case, Dahlia, will you tell Cartham that I'll be waiting for my usual servants' lunch, then? Pretty please?"

I have so much fun hurrying to breakfast in the morning, wondering what far-off region our food will hail from that day! It's so tragic that I'm losing my special time to sit down and eat with everyone!

"Certainly, Madam."

I sighed. "It's so late already. I'll see you in the morning."

It's way past my bedtime. I already feel bad for making all the servants, not just Dahlia and Mimosa, work overtime.

"Sleep well, Madam."

"Good night."

They both bowed and left the room.

I'll have to wear my wife clothes tomorrow, so I better make sure I don't forget and put on my uniform!

Is everything going alright with Miss Calendula? I haven't the slightest clue what goes on at the cottage, but I'd at least like to ask her to not bring their problems over here.

I'm all worn out for today though. Both my physical and mental stamina have been worn paper thin after all that socializing. The party tonight might as well have been my second formal debut.

I was basically a wallflower at the few social events I was able to attend back when I was poor, since I was so out of the loop. There wasn't a lot of talking or dancing at those parties, anyway, which made them a people-watching paradise. But now that my circumstances—or heck, my whole fate—have changed and I'm part of the inner circle, parties leave me exhausted!

It's so nice to be in bed... zzzzzz.

I fell into such a deep sleep that I didn't even dream, and awoke to a fresh, new morning and the sound of birds chirping as they flew by.

I was impressed that I was able to wake up at almost the same

time I normally did.

Dahlia and Mimosa hadn't come to wake me up yet, so I pulled the covers over my head and let myself go back to sleep. Some time later, there was a light knock on my door and the two of them entered.

"Good morning, Madam," they said in unison.

"Morning."

While Dahlia draped a stole over my shoulders, Mimosa disappeared gleefully into my dressing room. It was clear she was excited because I wouldn't be wearing my uniform today.

"What are Mr. Fisalis' plans for today?" I asked Dahlia, figuring I had better check ahead of time.

"He will be eating breakfast here and then leaving for work."

I could tell by her unhurried, measured answer that the Cercis Shift was already well underway.

Just my luck.

Of course, it was too much to ask for her to tell me he'd left in the wee hours of the morning for an early shift.

"Alright. I'll be down to the dining room when I'm done getting ready," I answered back to Dahlia's reflection in the mirror as I took a seat in front of my vanity.

When I was finished, I went to the dining room. Just as I was taking my seat at the table, Mr. Fisalis came in.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

He was already wearing his knight uniform. *I guess he had an extra one ready here for him.*

His crisp uniform only amplified his already dashing appearance. Having only seen him at night, for the most part, he looked quite different in the bright sunlight.

"Is something the matter?" he inquired, having taken his seat without me noticing.

Danger, danger!

I must've been staring at him for way too long. I'm a total weirdo.

I've gotta master his talent for checking someone out without looking like a creep!

"I was just thinking that while you do look wonderful in your formal clothes, you look even better in your casual attire."

He gave me an astonished look that I took to mean 'what did she just say?' the moment I let those unfiltered words spill out of my mouth. But once the words sunk in, I guess, his expression shifted to one of easy astonishment.

It was then that our breakfasts were brought in.

Yes, *plural*. Breakfasts.

I had completely forgotten about it ever since I had done away with the old breakfast menu, but Mr. Fisalis' breakfast (and mine today as well, apparently) was basically a buffet!

...I can't get out of eating this, can I?

28 — My Stomach Hurts!

A multitude of plates were brought in one after another and placed on the long dining table.

Ah, that's right. His favorite food changes by the day! It completely slipped my mind.

But when my mother and father-in-law were visiting recently, I feel like breakfast went differently.

How strange.

The number of plates in front of me, as well, were rapidly multiplying.

The portions were smaller, as I'd hoped they'd be, but they were portions of exactly the same dishes that were being served to Mr. Fisalis.

Dishes made with luxurious, rich ingredients.

Nooo, this is too much for so early in the day!

My cheek twitched slightly in shock and horror.

Thank goodness Dahlia delivered my message to Cartham for me.

I didn't want this to be the case, but all I could think about was my usual servants' lunch.

I have two options: either I don't eat it and end up being That Girl, or I do eat it and condemn myself to intestinal terrorism.

In typical 'me' fashion, I was utterly repulsed at the idea of wasting food. Mother would scold me if I didn't clean my plate.

I don't know what else to say, other than that you can take a person out of poverty, but you can't take the poverty out of a person, so staging an all-out war in my stomach was preferable to leaving food on my plate.

I glared at the plates of food while a council in my mind rapidly convened under the banner of "commitment to combating gastrointestinal terrorism."

"Everything looks delicious."

The sound of Mr. Fisalis' voice brought me back to reality. All of the food had been brought out and placed on the table.

"...it sure does." Steeling myself, I picked up my fork and knife.

Zero hour is upon us.

...okay, maybe that's a little extreme for just breakfast.

A little while later:

I was absolutely annihilated by the enemy. The end.

It was delicious. So delicious that I moaned out loud; actually Cartham really put his heart and soul into that food. And he and his team were thoughtful enough to only put one or two bites on my plates.

My stomach was doing fine at first, enough that I was able to enjoy the food, but come the midway point things took a turn for the worse... in the form of stabbing pain.

This seems like a sign that I'm approaching my limit.

In spite of that, I covered it up by interspersing the heavy foods with light salad and kept on eating, but then suddenly, I couldn't take any more.

This realization came with a remarkably sharp pain.

I can't hold out anymore!

My stomach gurgled loudly.

THONK.

"...owwww!"

Hand over my stomach, I smacked my forehead hard on the table as my body was bent in half by the pain.

"Viola!?"

"Eek! Madam!"

"Madam!? Are you quite alright!?"

I was aware that my sudden crisis had sent Mr. Fisalis, Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa into panic, but all I could focus on at the moment was the pain. Smacking my forehead on the table only added insult to injury.

"I-I'm. I'm fi...ine. My stomach, just. Started to hurr—" I struggled to get the words out under all this agony. I was completely incoherent.

"You're not well! Mimosa, get her bed ready! I'll carry her!"

Mimosa watched as Mr. Fisalis rushed over to where I was still slumped in my chair; he put one arm around my shoulders, the other under my legs, and picked me up.

Then Mimosa hurried ahead of him toward my room.

"She's so pale. There could have been something in her food. It doesn't seem as if there was anything in mine, though..." he murmured. *No*, I wanted to respond, *this isn't food poisoning. This is just what it looks like when a stomach meant for plain food is fed too much lavish cuisine.*

I know this looks like I'm being incredibly overdramatic, but...

"Er, um..." Dahlia stammered, at a loss for words at the thought of my suffering.

If this were food poisoning, it would be Cartham's fault, but I'd be humiliated if she found out the truth, too. I'm sorry for making you have to

ask him the tough question, Dahlia.

"That's alright. Save it for later. We should get her to her room first."

"As you wish."

I could hear the conversation happening from my position in Mr. Fisalis' arms. At the rate things were going, I was certain they'd blame Cartham, but I was rendered useless by the pain.

I'll defend your innocence once I'm better, Cartham! Forgive me for not being able to defend you now!

I was laid on my bed as soon as we got to my room.

"I'll call for a doctor, so please, just rest." Mr. Fisalis brushed my strawberry blonde fringe away from my forehead as he peered at my face.

"No... it's no... t. A... s bad as it. Looks. Some... medicinal her... bs will work. Just... fine."

My speech is uncoordinated, but I think he understood me.

I just need some herbal medicine that will treat the pain—or rather, accelerate digestion. Bellis grows some in the corner of the garden.

"No. For pain this serious, you should see a doctor." His expression was grim, creases forming between his eyebrows, but if he called a doctor, all they'd say is, "It's just a tummy ache—she shocked her stomach by eating extravagant food too quickly! Ah ha ha ha!" I'd be a laughing stock.

When he wouldn't listen to me, I put my hand up, signaling him to stop, and made my request again. "I—I mean. It. I'll. Be fine. Have Mi... mosa. Bring me... some. Medicinal herbs."

A quick conversation happened through eye contact alone between Mr. Fisalis and Mimosa:

"Bring us some digestive herbs!"

"Roger!"

Ugh... I've broken out in a cold sweat.

Mimosa! I need those herbs ASAP, por favor!

"Right away, sir! I'll be right back!" she said, turning and dashing from the room.

"Are you sure you don't want a doctor?" Mr. Fisalis tried again, not backing down.

You're exceptionally stubborn today, aren't you?

Look, I won't be the only one who'll be embarrassed if you call a doctor, so drop it.

I gathered my strength to respond.

"Ye... s." I tried to smile, although even my face felt weak, but Mr. Fisalis' face fell at my attempt.

"It hurts that badly!? Good grief, you're really... "

Guess he mistook my smile for a face twisted in excruciating pain.

Welp.

Just then, Cartham came running into the room instead of Mimosa.

“Madame! I heard that your stomach was troubling you! Are you alright? I am so sorry!” he said.

In the blink of an eye, he had glided over to my bedside, and no sooner had he come to stand by Mr. Fisalis, than he took my hand and planted a kiss on it! His smooth moves hadn’t suffered even a bit.

But the gesture wasn’t brimming with its usual self-confidence. Instead, his brows were upturned in worry.

Huh, hot guys still look good even when they’re frowning.

No fair.

“Yes, I’m. Fiiine. I’ll be all. Bet... ter once I. Go to. Sleep.” Just as I was pulling my feeble hand away from him like I always did, Mr. Fisalis peeled Cartham’s hand off of mine.

Thank you! I thought to myself for a split second, before I realized that now it was Mr. Fisalis who was holding my hand.

“Cartham, are you sure you didn’t make any mistake preparing the food today?” he said to Cartham in a low voice, dripping with intimidation.

Cartham is being falsely accused, Mr. Fisalis! Or rather, all of the servants in the manor know that the cause of my pain is simply eating overly luxurious food. They’re just staying silent to protect my honor.

“Of course, I exercised my usual diligence and made everything with love. No errors were made,” he told Mr. Fisalis with a respectfully lowered gaze. Still, Mr. Fisalis’ own dagger-like gaze seemed to pierce through him.

He’s enraged at the thought of scandal (can you even call this a scandal?) among his staff.

It’s quite the opposite, though. Forgive me for saying so, Cartham, but you make the food for the servants in a much more relaxed manner than the food to be served to Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend.

How the servants’ food doesn’t upset my stomach is the real mystery. Ergh.

This whole melodrama is all because the bacteria in my gut couldn’t hold their own against breakfast.

It’s also their fault that I can’t talk about it, which in turn means I can’t defend or explain myself!

And that’s made for a very uncomfortable feeling in the air.

“Master, you’ll be late if you don’t leave now. Please leave Madam to me.” Rohtas’ matter-of-fact tone cut through the unpleasant atmosphere in the room.

29 — New Information

Mr. Fisalis didn't move from my bedside, even at Rohtas' urging.

"I can't abandon her when she's this ill. She's so pale. I don't think I could do so even once I've calmed down..." he persevered. I didn't understand why.

"But, did you not have an important meeting today, Master?" *I knew I could count on you, Rohtas. You know Mr. Fisalis' schedule inside and out.*

Mr. Fisalis stubbornly refused to move from where he knelt beside my bed, clasping my hand. It didn't even seem like he had acknowledged the mention of an important meeting at first.

"...fine. But keep me updated on her condition." He glared at Rohtas, whose calm expression never wavered, with a look of betrayal.

Wait, no. This isn't bad enough to be called a 'condition.'

I listened, rendered helpless by my stomach ache as well as its embarrassing cause, to their conversation from under my duvet.

"I shall indeed," Rohtas politely confirmed. Having unwillingly agreed, Mr. Fisalis turned to me again, and squeezed my hand that was held in his once more.

"I have no choice but to go, but I promise I will come home as soon as I can. Rest, until then. Dahlia, be sure to call for a doctor if her condition worsens." He was smiling even though he seemed worried.

He finally released my hand, and then, taking his coat from a maid and putting it on quickly, reminded everyone, "Please, keep a watchful eye on her," before exiting the room with Rohtas in tow.

"Ahh, it reallyyy. Hurts," I groaned weakly once Mr. Fisalis was gone. The pain still had not let up.

"Mimosa ought to be back soon. You only need to bear it a little while longer," Dahlia said as she gently rubbed my stomach.

"This wouldn't have happened if I had cut down the number of dishes. I'm terribly sorry for not taking you into consideration," Cartham said in a despondent tone.

"And if only I'd had the sense to say something... Please forgive me," Dahlia said regretfully with a frown.

There the two of them were, groveling—but I was one one who'd actually messed up!

“No, no... ouchhh.” I wanted to speak, but couldn’t get the words out.

“You don’t need to say anything, Madam!” Dahlia forbade me, flustered.

Just then, there was a rapid knock on the door and Mimosa came hurrying in.

In her hands was a cup of green liquid; she had mashed the herbs into a drinkable medicine for me. There wasn’t time for her to boil it, but for an emergency like this, it would have to do.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting! Drink this, Madam!” She passed the cup of liquid to me. It was a dark brown color.

Dark brown... like...

It was thick and had such a strong grassy odor from the many herbs mixed in it that it nearly numbed my sense of smell.

Drink this and you’ll feel better.

But it looks nasty.

And I could always just... not drink it.

But I don’t really have a choice if I want the pain to go away.

I played this argument with myself on loop in my head as I pondered the cup in front of me.

Won’t drinking this only worsen battlefield conditions in my stomach?

I was about to refuse, but when I happened to look up, I was met with the grave expressions on everyone’s faces, and realized I had no choice but to resolve myself to it.

Mimosa pulled me up into a sitting position and put pillows behind my back for me to lean into. I shut my eyes tightly and downed the herbal medicine in one gulp.

The fresh tasting herbs and camellia juice made the concoction less bitter than I expected.

I shouldn’t be surprised that Mimosa and Bellis would come up with something that went down easily. And thank goodness for that.

The medicine took effect immediately, and my stomach started to feel better.

There’s still some pain, but at this rate, it feels like my cramps will subside soon.

Phew.

“Ahhh. Thanks. I feel a bit better. Ah ha... That gave me a scare. I’m sure yesterday’s exhaustion didn’t help, either.” I was able to talk without as much strain and struggle as before.

“Oh, what a relief! Let me give you a massage to help it along,” offered Mimosa with a weak smile.

She had been pale from worry when she ran out of the room, and collapsed in relief when my condition improved. Even so, she got right to squeezing the pressure points along my back.

“Ahh... it’s working. That feels great.” *Right there, behind my stomach.* I was in heaven.

“It is such a relief that you are doing better,” Dahlia sighed. “But please do rest a while longer. I will bring you more medicine before lunch,” she said, her expression no longer panicked.

“I will. Thank you.”

“Please relax inside, today.”

“But if I don’t get some exercise, I won’t digest anything. May I go out to the garden as long as I take it easy?”

As soon as I said it, Dahlia’s face turned sullen once more.

“...do not overexert yourself,” she reluctantly agreed with me, although I could all but hear the “for heaven’s sake, Madam,” in her sigh as she did.

I mean, there’s no reason to stay in bed all day over fancy food poisoning. Exercise probably makes for even better medicine.

“I won’t. I’ll just plant the new flowers that arrived.”

It’s not as if I’m going to do laps! I never said I’d do something that would make my ribs ache even more.

I looked up at Dahlia with my puppy dog eyes on full blast; her expression was one of resignation.

“Very well. Mimosa, keep an eye on her.” Dahlia exchanged a glance with Mimosa and then nodded.

Hmph, doesn’t she trust me?

“Of course, will do!” Mimosa nodded exaggeratedly in affirmation.

I fell asleep after lying back down for a moment, and when I woke up, my stomach was all better.

I still feel bloated, but as long as I’m not in pain, I don’t consider that a problem!

“Ah, you’re awake. How is your pain?” Noticing that I had woken up, Dahlia came over to check on me.

“Er, it’s all gone now. Thank you. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Even the cramping is gone—I’m back to 100%.

I was somewhat stiff, though, since my whole body had been under so much stress.

“After you rest a bit more, I’ll bring you a decoction. What will you do about lunch?”

Since we had the time now, Dahlia was going to prepare a boiled medicinal drink for me. It’s similar to tea, and since it’s easier to drink than plain crushed raw herbs, I thankfully wouldn’t have to steel myself for it.

“I’ll hold off on lunch. I think I’ll just have a light snack instead.”

“As you wish,” Dahlia said before leaving to issue the many necessary instructions.

I changed into my uniform and went out to the garden after I

drank the decoction.

I've got to make sure I move around today to help move things along on the inside! I'll pull weeds and plant flowers, just like Bellis showed me.

Demon King Bellis was unquestionably at the top of the hierarchy in this floral fiefdom! Planting the wrong thing in the wrong place would only bring about his wrath. If I wanted to garden just for fun, he had set aside a little area just for me to plant things however I pleased.

I knew the garden would come out balanced and cohesive so long as I followed his instructions, so I refrained from imposing my own preferences on how to arrange the flowers.

After a while, I was hungry.

Coincidentally, Bellis had just said, "It's getting to be about time for my break. Are you and Mimosa going to the dining room?"

"Oh, you're right. Let's call it a day. I'll be in trouble if he comes home early."

I stood up and brushed the dirt from my knees and skirt.

There's a light meal waiting for me in the dining room (and by that, I mean the servants' dining room, of course), so I'll call it quits for today.

"Bellis, I put your tea on the table in the greenhouse. Let's head back, Madam," Mimosa prompted me.

Many maids' break times overlapped, so there were several of them in the servants' dining room making tea for themselves and eating snacks.

"Are you all better now, Madam?"

"You're under no obligation to finish all your food, so please don't feel like you have to."

"That's right!"

The maids sighed in relief and called out to me when they saw that I was doing much better.

"I'm sorry for worrying you! I'm feeling fine now!" I replied as I took my seat with my snack.

"I wonder if you were still tired from yesterday."

"That's a possibility."

She's right—that's certainly possible. I was both mentally and physically exhausted, after all.

Not to mention the quality and the quantity of the food (mostly the quality, though), coupled with Mr. Fisalis' presence—I didn't stand a chance against the enemy intestinal forces.

I nodded in agreement when their statements jogged my memory, as I wolfed down my snack.

"Speaking of yesterday, Mr. Fisalis' companion was certainly in a mood," the personal maid who had been assigned to the cottage the day before said, with an exasperated look on her face.

“You can say that again. It started after Mr. Fisalis suddenly announced that he’d stay overnight here at the main house.”

“Yup.”

“She’s been in a right awful mood since he started coming here every night for dinner.”

Everyone was getting worked up, but I for one could understand why Miss Calendula would feel that way. *She has to be lonely if Mr. Fisalis started avoiding the cottage in favor of the main house after they’d had a fight. You couldn’t exactly expect her to be in a good mood.*

All the same, it wasn’t right for her to take her anger out on others.

“I don’t think she’ll start any trouble over here, so I’m not too worried, but she’s constantly frowning these days, isn’t she?

“The way she was obsessing over her appearance, though. That’s how you *cause* wrinkles, not prevent them.”

“It seems like she isn’t getting whatever dresses or jewelry she wants lately, either.”

“Probably because she already has all she could ever need.”

“Right?”

Mr. Fisalis’ personal maid wasn’t the only one venting anymore; other maids had joined in the conversation.

I had been focused on my food, only listening silently to the exchange up until that point, but then I decided to ask what I had been wondering about all along.

“Haven’t Mr. Fisalis and his girlfriend been fighting?”

“What? No?” All of the maids who attended to Mr. Fisalis responded, in unison, flabbergasted.

“Ah, I see. Then why has he been coming here for dinner every night?” I asked with a tilt of my head.

If it’s not a fight, then what in the world could it possibly be?

30 — Mr. Fisalis' Interest?

Why would Mr. Fisalis come here after work if he's not fighting with his girlfriend?

"I wonder if something is drawing him here," I said without thinking. I suddenly felt several sets of eyes on me and looked up. Sure enough, everyone was staring at me.

"...Is it me?" I gingerly asked, pointing at myself. Truly, only I could be this dense.

And wouldn't you know, they all nodded! And vigorously at that! Then they started to speak at once.

"Well, yes."

"Speaking of things that have changed around here, you're certainly one of them..."

"You, as well as the atmosphere in the manor."

And then one of them said, "Madam, this is a chance at rehabilitation!"

They all leaned forward in excitement at that.

I drew back into my chair, intimidated. "Re-rehabilitation!?"

"An opportunity to turn Master back into the upstanding gentleman he was before he became a sex fiend!"

"Whaaat!?"

They all just nodded.

Even with all the charm and skill in the world, that would be impossible, so please don't look at me with your eyes shining full of hope!

"Move along, you lot. The break period is just about done. Stop bothering Madam," someone said, putting the commotion to an end. It was Dahlia. She had come to get me.

With a clap of her hands, everyone snapped back to reality.

"Yes, ma'am!" the maids responded, dispersing with their cups in hand.

My break was over, too, as I had finished my snack. I picked up my plate and cup and went to get up, but Mimosa quickly snatched them away.

Dahlia watched with one of her characteristic strained smiles. She never seemed to run out of them.

"A message from Master just arrived. It seems he will be coming home earlier than usual. I think you ought to return to your room, just to be safe," she urged me.

Oh, it is getting to be that time already.

"I see. I'll go rest in my room for a while, then."

I'd have some explaining to do if he caught me wandering around in my uniform. I mean, he even wanted me on full bed rest for my pain.

Come to think of it, my stomach's completely calmed down.

Thank you, herbal medicine!

There was nothing to do in my room.

Although he had certainly seemed depressed when he'd left, I had no idea when Mr. Fisalis was going to get back; I had reverted back to my old routine of tossing and turning on the sofa, when suddenly, Mimosa appeared and said, "Master has returned."

He wasn't kidding when he sent his message earlier—he was *very* early.

It was evening, technically, but the sun hadn't even set.

"Oh, okay. I'm on my way," I said, and I was just about to get up from the sofa when I heard a soft voice from behind Mimosa say, "Ah, there's no need for a formal greeting today. I'm back."

"M—Mr. Fisalis!?" Far from getting up, I thought I was going to fall off the sofa.

I just can't seem to act natural when I'm here!

Mimosa moved out of the way, allowing him to make a dashing entrance into the room.

Is he frowning because he's worried about me?

As I went to get up (or rather, fall down), he held his hand out to stop me.

"How are you feeling? The message said that you hadn't gotten worse and were convalescing," he said, reaching me in the blink of an eye with those long legs of his. He then knelt down beside me to examine my color.

That is to say, his face was now mere inches from mine! I very nearly leaned back, but stopped myself in time. "That's right. The decoction worked. I started to feel better after a bit," I somehow managed to respond with a smile, even though I had broken out in a cold sweat from overexposure to his magnificently chiseled visage.

"I'm glad to hear it. I already feel more at ease knowing you have recovered enough to take a walk around the garden."

His expression changed from one of worry back to its usual dazzling smile.

"Indeed."

I see Rohtas did some light editing in the message. 'Went for a stroll' instead of 'pulled some weeds.'

"In the meantime, however... here," He held out something to me that he'd brought with him.

At first glance, it appeared to be a tiny bouquet of grasses. But

there wasn't a single flower.

The heck is this?

Is he telling me to eat this? What does he think I am, a cow? ...No, that can't be it.

Mr. Fisalis smiled ever so slightly as I stared dumbly at the little bundle.

"It's from the Royal Medicinal Garden. Just some medicinal herbs for stomach pain," he said as he wrapped my hand around the grass—er, herbs.

"Wow, the one on the palace grounds?"

"Yes," he grinned.

The Royal Medicinal Garden is where all of the medicine used in the palace is grown, including the medicine for the royal family; the garden does not use chemical pest repellants, instead opting for completely natural fertilizer to carefully cultivate every individual herb, one at a time. This is why entrance to the garden is strictly regulated, which in turn means that medicinal herbs from that garden are rather unlikely to fall into the hands of more-or-less regular people.

And yet, here you are handing me this rare and valuable medicine! How many strings did you have to pull to acquire this?

"How did... Is it really alright for me to have something so valuable?" *Probably best I don't ask how he got it.*

"Think nothing of it. The royal couple was worried about you, too."

He let that slip like it was no big deal. Unbelievable.

The king. And. The queen! I was left speechless by how detached from reality his statements were.

My eyes widened, and my mouth opened and closed in shock.

"I occasionally meet with them in the medicinal garden. When I mentioned that my wife was having stomach pain, they didn't hesitate to share some herbs for treating just that."

EEK! He told them about my stomach issues! I mean, I don't mind if he said that I had a stomach ache, but the day he tells them I basically got poisoned by too much fancy food is the day I can't show my face to them anymore.

Then again, he doesn't know that much yet.

His ignorance is my bliss!

"Oh, eh heh heh... how thoughtful of them." I could only manage a hollow giggle.

"Dahlia, make this into medicine," Mr. Fisalis ordered.

"As you wish."

He passed the bundle of herbs into Dahlia's outstretched hand, after which she left to do as he had instructed.

The herbs are fresh, so I guess the end result will be less of a decoction and more of a juice; I guess I'm in for a juice cleanse.

One more drink I'll have to endure, I thought cynically.

After absentmindedly watching Dahlia leave, Mr. Fisalis turned to me and asked, "What do you want to do for dinner tonight?"

Honestly, I don't have the courage to try the fancy food again, even if it's only half portions. That'd only result in another intestinal insurgence. I'd really rather have a simple servants' meal, but I can't say that.

"I'll keep it simple again tonight. I'll have just something light, but please, don't let me hold you back. You shouldn't have to eat alone, though, so why don't you eat at the cottage?"

I tried to say, "Pleeease, go back to the cottage" as indirectly as I could.

That would be the most convenient thing for me, anyway.

"No, I'll eat by myself here. That is, I'm still concerned about you—which is also why I think I'll stay overnight again."

So not only are you not leaving for dinner, you're also staying here overnight again! This flies in the face of all my expectations!

"Oh, goodness, no need to worry about me. I've been taking it easy all day, so I'm sure I'll be back to my usual self tomorrow!"

"But..." He was frowning as he looked up at me.

Mr. Fisalis, you large-breed show dog. I can practically see your drooping tail.

"If anything happens, I'll come and inform you at once." Unable to stand by and watch his Master leave with his tail between his legs, Rohtas offered a solution.

Is he trying to help me or Mr. Fisalis, though?

"...Very well. Please stay in bed, then. I'll see you tomorrow." Mr. Fisalis left quietly, somewhat dejected.

31 — The Showdown!

Once Mr. Fisalis was tactfully sent on his way, our first Cercis Shift-free night in a long, long time could begin!

How long has it been since I could eat a servants' meal for dinner? I'm so happy, I can't help but smile a little!

I arrived at the servants' dining room, having practically skipped my way there, where I found Dahlia lying in wait with the medicinal juice in her hands and a smile on her face.

"Please drink this before your meal, Madam," she said with a grin. Her smile that night was unusually frightening.

"Sure!"

When Dahlia has that look on her face, there's no way I can say no! I took the juice from her right away. It had a pleasant, thick consistency.

Looks like this will be very potent. I have to drink this if I want my servants' meal!

I chugged it down with one hand on my lower back. Girls get it done!

Girl power notwithstanding, it was made with ease of drinking in mind. I could tell that Dahlia had put a lot of consideration into the process.

Thanks, Dahlia.

My long-awaited dinner party with the maids followed. The meal that night was a Rovençal style tourteau. Another one of Cartham's masterpieces, it was a healthy dish: a square pie packed with vegetables, cooked in a vinegary vegetable paste.

Ah, I missed eating in this dining room!

The maids were chatting excitedly as they ate, but I suddenly and surprisingly found myself thinking about Mr. Fisalis. Perhaps I had been too overbearing when I'd sent him back to the cottage. *He'd actually seemed like he cared about me back there, and although I can't say I feel the same, maybe I should have eaten with him... even if it was just a snack*, I thought to myself.

His girlfriend, who he prefers over me, is at the cottage too, though. It's not my place to barge in. Yeah, that would come off as inconsiderate.

"Is something the matter? Is your stomach still bothering you?" Mimosa asked with a worried expression. I guess I hadn't said anything for a while.

“Oh, no. I feel great, thanks to those items that the purveyor of herbs at the royal palace graciously sent to me! I was just distracted by how good the food was! Ah ha,” I smiled in response.

I think it worked! I'm in the clear.

“You're right! It is good, isn't it?” she answered back unreservedly.

Yup, she has no idea.

The next morning:

I was eating my breakfast in the servants' dining room as usual when ordinarily unflappable Dahlia came calling for me, flustered. “Madam, Master is here.”

“Huh?”

“He is in the entrance.”

“What!?”

So that's what's got her all worked up.

Mr. Fisalis usually leaves for work straight from the cottage without stopping by the main house, so what does he think he's doing this morning? More importantly, I'm still in my uniform! At this point I should be glad that he didn't just go straight to my (very empty) room!

“Put this on; it should provide you some camouflage,” Dahlia said as she draped a housecoat over my shoulders. When I closed the front tightly, no one could tell I was wearing my uniform.

Nice save, Dahlia!

I put on a face that hopefully said, “Oh, goodness, you caught me just as I was leaving the main dining room!” and hurried to where Mr. Fisalis was waiting.

“Good morning. I'm sorry to have kept you,” I greeted, as I trotted over to him.

“Good morning to you, as well. How are you feeling?” he replied when he saw me.

His expression visibly relaxed when he saw that I was in good spirits. And he gave no sign that he had noticed I had my uniform on under my housecoat.

And she's... safe!

“I've completely recovered, all thanks to the herbs you gave me.” It really did work—that thick juice really did the trick.

Please excuse the face I just made when I remembered the bitter taste, though.

“I'm glad to hear that. I'll inform His Majesty, too.”

“Oh, no, you don't have...”

I doubt His Majesty wants to hear about a retainer's wife's tummy troubles.

“Are you sure? Alright, never mind. I'll be home early again

today, take care,” he said. His eyes crinkled as he smiled and he reached out to my cheek.

“What!? ...I mean, of course, I’ll be waiting.”

He was behaving so strangely that I’m sure my eyes widened in shock for a moment there, but I locked my knees and managed not to fall over! Hopefully I looked like I was smiling, although it was probably really awkward.

Mr. Fisalis was... completely fooled by my smile; he gave my cheek a single, gentle stroke before saying, “I’ll be going, then,” and jauntily made his way out, shutting the door behind him.

“...what was it he wanted?” I whispered to myself, staring at the door after he left.

My cheek felt warm where he’d touched it.

“I believe he was simply worried about you,” Dahlia replied.

“You’re probably right. That’s what it sounded like, anyway. I wonder what’s gotten into him.” I cocked my head in confusion.

I don’t think your show wife getting a stomach ache warrants that level of concern. It’d be a different story if his girlfriend was the one who’d fallen ill.

“Perhaps he’s grown to care for you?” Dahlia asked with a strained smile.

“He sure didn’t act like it up until now.”

Jeez. I can’t seem to wrap my head around his behavior lately.

It was raining that day, so we proceeded with the customary rainy day schedule.

It was quite a grueling schedule, consisting of a mid-morning dance lesson, a break for lunch followed by a spa session, and then another dance lesson until evening—all aimed at counteracting my overeating (or rather, its resultant weight gain)... but darn it if I wasn’t going to give it my all!

Thanks to Rohtas’ special training (read: hazing), I had learned to dance elegantly to any tune. I had mastered the basics enough to no longer require an imaginary cheerleading team just to stay upright. I had come so far! Even Dahlia complimented my improved posture and how beautifully I had started to carry myself. And having demonstrated as much at the evening party, I didn’t feel embarrassed to be praised.

As the Spa Squad—spearheaded by Mimosa—progressed further with my treatments, a ‘mud clay mask,’ a ‘skin brightening mask’... the list was getting longer and longer.

But when Commander Mimosa’s troops offered me a massage and I considered how much joy they seemed to get out of all the treatments they gave me, I couldn’t refuse them.

Besides, their efforts had done wonders for my complexion—my

skin was smoother and more elastic than ever.

My full-course spa treatment was followed by my usual formal makeup.

Well aware that I still had another dance lesson afterwards, they applied makeup that could withstand sweat and tears.

Heavier than normal makeup, less recognizable than normal Viola.

Mimosa's choices were based on the weather that day: "It's so gloomy outside, so bright colors ought to do the trick." She dressed me in a beautiful rose-hued dress that was light and not too restrictive before I headed off to my dance lesson.

I had already danced off whatever weight I'd put on from overeating the day before and, in fact, it felt like I'd shed some negative vibes along with the pounds, but I didn't have the guts to boycott the upcoming lesson. *After all, since a precedent has been set, I don't know when I might be recruited to go to another evening party! I wonder if, in a way, I was lucky to have had that chance? ...Yeah, that was a surprisingly positive experience, if I do say so.*

As Mimosa and I followed Dahlia to where my lesson was to be held, we passed by the entrance.

"Oh, you're the head maid, right? So then... that must be the duchess," said a familiar voice from somewhere nearby.

It was Calendula! It's a raid!

"As I have informed you before, we would be more than happy for your company, but only if you give prior notice," Dahlia said blankly as she moved between me and Calendula, shielding me.

Expressionless Dahlia was utterly terrifying.

"Oh, come now—no need to be so strict. I beg your pardon. Oh ho ho ho..." Calendula's laugh was loud, but her smile didn't reach her eyes.

She wore flawless makeup, as well as a black dress that showed off her ample breasts.

"In any case, do you have some sort of business with Madam?"

"No, I just wanted to introduce myself. She never seemed to be home when I dropped by, so I started to wonder if she actually existed," she said with a cutting sidelong glance from the fan she held in front of her lips. That was uncalled for!

The truth that I was the lady of the house had finally been revealed.

Well, even if I've been exposed, she still doesn't know that primed and powdered Duchess Fisalis is the same person as the lowly servant girl.

Calendula and Dahlia were glaring at each other (as I was glaring past Dahlia at Calendula) when Rohtas' voice cut through the tense air. "Unfortunately, Madam is very busy, and is unable to meet with you at the moment. It is as Dahlia just said: if you had sent a message

saying you wished to visit beforehand, we would have made time for you.”

His voice was like ice, completely different from his normal tone. He had most likely come to look for us after some time had passed and I hadn't shown up for my lesson.

“Isn't it odd that she's never around to begin with? I mean, from what I hear, she doesn't go to social events either. Where had she been all that time, I wonder,” Calendula glared at Rohtas, clearly at the end of her rope.

She normally gives up and leaves about now, but today she's holding out.

Oh... could that be because she's finally caught me?

Rohtas quietly stepped in front of Dahlia to square off against Calendula. “Her whereabouts are private information, strictly off limits to persons outside of the Fisalis family,” he told her bluntly, although I could not see his face.

“Well, I...” Calendula suddenly blushed as her perfectly sculpted eyebrows rose in surprise.

Clack!

She roughly snapped her fan shut.

Eeeeeee! A witch!

We've angered a jealous witch! I hid behind Dahlia who was behind Rohtas to merely watch the two-against-one battle unfold.

Don't be such a chicken.

I was about to join the battle when Dahlia's hand shot out in front of me, a clear sign to not go any farther. For the moment, I had no choice but to stand back.

“This is a private affair, so please leave us be,” Rohtas said coldly, without so much as flinching or blinking at Calendula's angry expression.

Can you hear him now, Calendula? Good!

Standing in the entrance behind Calendula, Mimosa held open the door and said simply, “Right this way!”

Weren't you just behind me a minute ago, Mimosa? You're like a ninja!

Calendula grasped her fan so tightly that her knuckles turned white. Just when it seemed like she was going to say something, her lips trembling alluringly, another new voice echoed through the entryway.

“They're right, Callie. Could you please leave—for me?”

Oh, I've heard this voice recently.

32 — What He Had to Say

“Go on, Callie.”

Mr. Fisalis is actually asking Calendula to leave again! He wasn't kidding this time either when he said he'd be home early.

“Cercis!” Calendula whipped around to face him.

“I've told you before, haven't I? That I've come to my senses.” His expression was more serious than I had ever seen.

This isn't his default smile.

But he's really carrying himself differently from usual, too. He's normally a lot more stiff and formal, isn't he?

While I was busy convincing myself this wasn't important, his beautiful, dark brown eyes bore into Calendula.

“You've been very good to me, Callie... but we can't go on like this,” he started to say. I was beginning to think that they ought to be having this personal conversation somewhere more private. Mr. Fisalis and Calendula seemed to have forgotten we were all still there: Rohtas, Dahlia, Mimosa, and I.

“Can we just slip away?” I whispered to Dahlia.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” she whispered back, when suddenly Mr. Fisalis addressed us.

“I want you all to hear this too.”

...curse you, Mr. Fisalis. Even his hearing is as sharp as a dog's.

We were barely making a sound and he still heard us.

There was nothing I could do once he had told us to stay, so I reluctantly nodded in agreement.

This is looking more and more like a lover's spat. I feel like I lost a bet or something, having to watch all this!

“All this time I've just been running from my responsibilities as a duke. I had to look out for my family all by myself... I was so lonely, but I couldn't let anyone know. I was trapped.”

Mr. Fisalis started to talk, never taking his eyes off of Calendula.

I feel like Dahlia told me all this before.

She and the others were right on the mark, then!

“Everyone only saw me as the heir to the duchy. No one would see me for who I really was... but you would joke around and laugh at me.”

“Hmph, I did do that sometimes, didn't I?”

Mr. Fisalis' smile looks so lonely, but Miss Calendula is so indifferent!

I wonder if her words have hurt him.

"I could relax and enjoy myself when I was with you. I could let go of my responsibilities as heir and as a duke."

Rohtas and Dahlia each made a fist as soon as he said so.

You guys really don't like that, do you? I totally understand why!

"I wouldn't even go near the main house. I suppose it must have been all those emotions I'd repressed all coming to the surface at once," he said, lowering his eyes and biting his lip.

Miss Calendula was facing me now, but I couldn't see her face as she silently grasped her fan, listening to Mr. Fisalis.

"I was shocked when I stepped into the manor after all that time; it had changed so much. The servants were lively, the place was overflowing with flowers and light, and more than anything... it looked happy," he said, looking toward me.

Our eyes met on what felt like instinct. I didn't understand why.

"The house changed when Viola came."

Hm? Me? I saw his bright eyes relax.

Calendula followed his line of sight and looked at me, too.

"Until now, the house felt cold to me; now, it's full of warmth."

That's because I took it upon myself to do the cleaning, washing, and decorating!

"I felt genuine curiosity about Viola, who had so easily taken complete responsibility for the title of 'lady of the house' that I had forced onto her."

Wow! That's what caught his eye?

"And we began to talk to each other a bit, so I started wanting to know more about her. The more time we spent together, the more I felt that supporting the family house was the most natural thing in the world for her."

Ah ha, I leveled up from "interesting" to "impressive!" But you give me too much credit, thinking that I'm totally supporting this household.

I simply preferred living as a servant, rather than a lady, so I squirmed uneasily at the praise.

"No matter how much time I spent with her, she was modest and never asked for a thing, and spared no effort to improve herself."

Does he mean my dance lessons? Or my spa treatments with Mimosa? I couldn't exactly refuse to do any of them, but... I wouldn't actually say that here.

Doesn't matter now, anyway.

"Oh, so in other words, all I ever did was pester you?" Calendula shot back with narrowed eyes, clearly irritated.

"To be fair, I was the one who could never tell you 'no' when you did. But still, Callie, I can't help but feel that you wasted the past six years."

“I only ever said that I had wants. Even a simpleton wouldn’t refuse a gift.”

“Viola has never even once asked for anything. She’s the kind of person who, when I tried to buy her things, told me she already had more than enough, and turned them down.”

“So what?” Calendula coldly said back.

“When I took her to an evening party she had no interest in going to, she still socialized, even though it was hard for her. She far exceeded my expectations for a duchess. And what did you do, Callie? You would leave me on the dance floor when you didn’t feel like dancing, and rudely reject others’ invitations to dance.”

“I don’t see why you even expected me to. I’m no duchess, for one, and no one *really* likes having to flatter strangers at parties!” Calendula chuckled haughtily.

“You’re right, I used to think that way, too—but when I saw Viola, I realized I was wrong. There’s no need to force yourself to do something, but you can at least use the bare minimum of politeness. Viola always took those around her into consideration, despite disliking high society. I’m certain of it.”

I have to agree with you there, Mr. Fisalis!

No sooner had his words entered her ears, though, than Calendula said, “But those people have nothing to do with me,” with a bold smirk.

“You’re nothing like them, that’s for sure—but even so, I can’t escape my ties to them. And that’s why I need to start making better decisions, too,” Mr. Fisalis said to her, his eyes narrowing sadly.

“Oh.” Calendula’s smile stiffened when his expression shifted, and she glared back at him. She was gripping her fan so hard it appeared to be on the verge of breaking.

“From now on, I want to protect Viola. She’s admirable and hard-working, and doesn’t resent me, even though I was the one who forced her into that fiendish contract and then abandoned her. Seeing her made me realize that I couldn’t just keep running away from my family and my title, and all the responsibilities that come with them... so, Calendula, I’m breaking up with you.”

He what!? He’s breaking up with her!?

Give—Give me a minute while I try not to panic!

33 — True Feelings

Sl-Slow down, Mr. Fisalis.

Did you say just now that you're breaking up with Miss Calendula?

And because of me? And yet, I've been left out of the conversation?

Really, what is going on here! ...calm down. Calm down.

Okay, first I need to get ahold of the situation here. Calmly.

"Excuse me, could we pause for a second...?"

Everyone's eyes were on me the instant I nervously voiced my suggestion. I really had no business interrupting Mr. Fisalis and Miss Calendula, who were still staring (glaring?) at one another, but there was something more important I needed to ask, and I had finally worked up the courage to do so.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Fisalis asked. He broke his gaze first and refocused it on me, then Calendula did the same.

"I'm sorry to have blurted it out so suddenly, but there's something I need to ask."

"Need to ask?"

"Yes."

I emerged from behind Dahlia, where I had been more or less hiding, and moved to stand where I could see Mr. Fisalis clearly. Rohtas remained between Calendula and I.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and asked my question.

"Just now you said that you are going to break up with Miss Calendula. If you do so, what will happen to me and our contract?"

"Huh?"

"Eh?"

Looks of surprise washed across Mr. Fisalis' and Calendula's faces simultaneously.

"I mean, isn't my position as show bride contingent on you having a girlfriend? So, if she were gone, what would that make me? My position becomes superfluous, doesn't it?"

I only went into greater detail because I wasn't sure if I understood my role, so why did they seem so surprised? I cocked my head in confusion, trying to figure out if I had said something strange, but nothing came to mind.

"Oh, er, that's..." Mr. Fisalis looked taken aback. It still seemed like he didn't understand me, so I continued.

"This would put me in a very difficult situation."

“Why is that?”

“Mr. Fisalis, if you break up with your girlfriend, you’ll be able to see anyone you want, right? So, to quote what you said earlier, the only reason you can’t marry Miss Calendula is because she isn’t of noble blood, but that if you found someone who *did* have the appropriate social status, that wouldn’t be a problem anymore. So if you break up with Miss Calendula, you’ll be able to marry someone you’re deeply and truly in love with.”

“I did say that, yes.” Mr. Fisalis tentatively nodded his head at my explanation, although it didn’t seem like it satisfied him.

“Which would mean that you’d have no need for a show bride like me. I’d be in the way, even.”

“Exactly! When I say that I’m going to break up with Callie, I don’t mean that I’m going to annul my marriage with you, Viola! In fact, I want to break up with her precisely because I think you’re better for me!”

“What!? ...Did I hear you right?”

Mr. Fisalis walked briskly over to me all flustered.

It was hard for me to have to look up at him once he was closer to me, and it wasn’t just because he was so much taller than me, either. But once I steadfastly met his dark brown eyes, I was finally able to reveal myself to him.

“It wasn’t my intention to tell you like this, so suddenly, but I’ve never thought of you that way.”

“...Oh, I see,” he said, clearly crestfallen at my confession.

His elegant brows drew together in a look of abject misery.

“Besides, didn’t you say when we met that you were deeply in love with your girlfriend?”

Seriously, who could have thought he’d shift his affection onto me!?

“Yes, I was—back then! But the more time I spent with you, and the more I talked with you, the more I became attracted to you, Viola!” he said at an even higher volume, blushing.

“Well if that were true, wouldn’t that have made you a cheater, then, splitting your time between the cottage and here?” I said, without holding back.

Rohtas and Dahlia are nodding like they agree with me.

Mr. Fisalis fell silent.

Sure is embarrassing, isn’t it? Can’t look me in the eye, huh?

“Plenty of wealthy men keep mistresses, so that in and of itself isn’t a crime, but I thought that your offer of a contract with me was a testament to how much you cared for Miss Calendula. I’m disappointed that I was mistaken.” He looked shocked, but I continued to glare daggers at Mr. Fisalis as I spoke.

I got everything out in one breath! It’s like a weight has been lifted off

of me!

“Viola...” Mr. Fisalis turned his gaze back to me and opened his mouth like he wanted to object.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” A joyful laugh, completely at odds with the tension in the air, suddenly echoed through the entryway.

Everyone jumped at the sudden noise and our eyes convened at the source of the laughter: Calendula, who until then had been watching the back-and-forth between Mr. Fisalis and I in silence.

She was holding her stomach and laughing loudly (very undignified!) with one hand still holding her fan in front of her lips. She looked about to explode with laughter.



“Ca-Callie!?” Mr. Fisalis was blinking in shock.

“What happened?” Dahlia asked.

“Who knows?” I replied, making eye contact with her.

Mimosa looks completely flabbergasted over there. Only Rohtas has been able to maintain his usual composed expression (no, wait...he's entered Ruthless Mode).

Meanwhile, Calendula laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face, heedless of the delicate situation unfolding around her.

“Ahh, this is the funniest thing I've ever seen! Your own wife won't return even one iota of your tenderest feelings, Cercis!”

Has she suddenly gone mad? I wondered. Calendula looked as though she could barely control her laughter at our mismatched romantic feelings. *Good.*

She brushed away her tears with finely-manicured, elegant fingertips.

“I can't help myself. She's just so uninterested in you! I'm sorry, Cercis, but you know I can't stand losers. I've got to wonder, though, when did *you* turn into one?”

“Huh!?”

Miss Calendula's sudden shift in attitude caught Mr. Fisalis off guard yet again. His beautiful face had gone stiff in shock at abruptly being called a loser.

He's probably never been called anything close to that, so my guess is that it shook him pretty hard.

My condolences.

“When I first met you, you met with me solely because you wanted to. You didn't care what anyone else thought. That's what I found attractive about you. But now... I'd never be seen with a loser like you. You think you're dumping me? What a laugh. I'm all too happy to give you away to your wife, you pathetic man!” Calendula said, looking my way.

I crossed my arms in front of me in an X shape, a symbol of my absolute rejection, and said, “Nooo, no, no, no!” I couldn't believe she just dumped him like that, but I sure didn't want him either!

“Ah ha ha ha! You even used to say that you didn't need a wife at all! What will you do now, Cercis? You should start by working yourself to the bone to make sure your wife doesn't ditch you, too! Then again, maybe an amusing, pretty, gutsy little wife like her is wasted on someone like you.”

Calendula was clutching her stomach, bent over in roars of laughter again. She wouldn't stop.

“Callie!” Mr. Fisalis scowled at Calendula. He had suddenly come back to himself after standing motionless, apparently stupefied. He

looked strikingly handsome even when he was angry. Calendula just scoffed at him.

“At any rate, any love or whatever that I had for you, Cercis, completely vanished the moment you showed off your weak side like this! Then again, I hadn’t planned to stay for as long as I did. Staying in one place isn’t my style, so I’ll do you a favor and get out of this stuffy house as fast as I can. Oh, and I’ll be taking the dresses and jewelry with me as compensation. He’s all yours now, Madam!” she said with the most refreshing smile I’d ever seen on her.

Uh, what? This has to be a joke. She just handed him off to me!?

“Um? Hold on a second! What will you...” Panicking, I tried to get her to wait, but she raised one hand as if to stop me.

“I’ll be more than fine making my living as a dancing girl, just like I did before. There’s no need for you to worry about me... we girls can get things done, right?” she smirked grimly.

Yeah, she seems like she’ll be fine.

Calendula turned, her dress billowing elegantly around her, and confidently disappeared out the door Mimosa was holding open.

Wow, talk about gone with the wind!

All that’s left is... Mr. Fisalis. He’s in a total daze.

I had torn him to shreds, and so had Calendula.

We’ve left him in quite a predicament, and it seems to have rattled him to the core.

What’s left of the shock is written all over his face, too. His complexion has gone from an embarrassed, angry red to white in horror.

We broke him.

...so what do I do now?

34 — Renewing the Contract

Calendula strode out the door like a gust of fresh wind, stretching her arms behind her as she walked off into the distance.

I, on the other hand, was left looking at Mr. Fisalis, still frozen in place like a marble statue.

I didn't know if I should have said anything to Calendula, so I just stayed quiet and watched her go. Rohtas and Mimosa were silent as well.

The two of them were expressionless, so I had no way of knowing what they were feeling, either.

Well then. What to do with my new Mr. Fisalis statue...

I could use him to decorate the entryway.

Pfft, no.

His gorgeous brown eyes were wide open, but they were staring at nothing in particular.

If I leave him here, he'll probably just stand here frozen in the entrance forever. Not to mention it would take a lot of manpower to move him since he's so tall and well-built.

So, concluding that he'd have to move himself, I waved my hand in front of his eyes.

"Mr. Fisalis? Mr. Fisalis? Your girlfriend left. Do you want me to go after her?"

Helllllo, are you in there? I shook my hands in front of his face. When I did, a light suddenly returned to his unfocused eyes, and then they were at odds with my own.

Startled at the sight of life abruptly returning to those brown eyes, I took a step back, only to find myself trapped.

"You're squishing me..."

Mr. Fisalis' arms were wrapped around me all of a sudden.

I couldn't tell whether it was simply physical strength or his fried nerves that made him hold me so tight. I swear I felt my soul start to leave my body! And it felt like it was taking some of my bones with it.

"M-Mr. Fisalis! You're hurrting me!"

I managed to smack him on his shoulder with my free hand, but considering he was a trained knight, it probably felt like a kitten pawing at him.

Eurrrgh!

Well, duh, think of how much bigger and stronger he is, I chided

myself, still struggling as his hold on me only grew tighter.

“Viola! You’re not going to say that you’re leaving, too, are you!?” His voice washed over me from above my head. It didn’t sound like it usually did, calm and pleasant on the ears. It was panicked and high-pitched.

“Huh?” I was baffled by his wimpy outburst and how big his eyes were, but he only held me tighter.

Erk. My spine! You’re bending my spine! I can hear it groaning under the pressure!

“Viola! Let’s sit down and talk again! So we can have a real marriage, not a shallow one just held together by a contract!”

If you want to talk, then loosen your grip! And stop rubbing your head on my cheek! Someone, help!

“We can’t have a long talk here, though, so let’s head to the salon.” No sooner had the suggestion left his mouth than he momentarily released me, only to lift me off my feet. I let myself hang in his arms like a ragdoll, completely at his mercy, worn out from struggling against his constrictor-like embrace the first time.



If he's just going to head to the salon all nonchalantly, why does he have to carry me like a bride on the way there? I mean, I am feeling a bit lightheaded—probably because I wasn't getting enough air before (thanks, Mr. Fisalis)—but I wonder if my stomach or something is off again today, too.

"Er, why is it that you're carrying me all the way there?" I asked gently, looking up at him. He then blessed me with a beautiful vision of his handsome face looking down at me and said, with an unusually serious expression, "So that you don't run away."

His intelligent eyes shone above me, but I couldn't help but think that he shouldn't waste his dashing looks on something like this.

What I mean is, I won't try to escape, so for Pete's sake, put me down! I can't bear the way Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa are watching us with gentle hope in their eyes!

"I won't run away, and the salon is right there! I can walk on my own!" I said, flailing as I tried to get him to put me down. Maybe it was because he was just that disciplined of a knight, but he didn't even flinch as I wiggled violently in his arms.

I want to scream!

"It's only a little bit farther. If you keep fussing, you might get hurt. See, here we are already." Sometime during our back-and-forth we'd arrived at our destination, his long legs getting us there in what seemed like record time. Just when I began to think, "Oh no, not more of this BDSM stuff," he deposited me softly on the sofa and then sat down beside me immediately after.

Why next to me? There are multiple places to sit that aren't right next to me! That, and this sofa can easily fit three people! Are we joined at the hip? You. Are. Too. Close!

The situation was so far beyond criticizing at that point; I didn't know why I even bothered.

The very first thing out of Mr. Fisalis' mouth was "To start with, and this should go without saying, I'm not annulling our marriage."

I should have guessed that's what he'd start with. After all, the contract was girlfriend-dependent from the get-go.

"But you don't have a girlfriend anymore. Not to mention that we didn't get married out of love—gosh, we were practically strangers."

"Many marriages out there start that way! You'd be hard pressed to find a place where marriages of convenience don't occur."

"That's true, but..."

It's the norm in high society to marry in order to share your spouse's status. You might even say that actual love marriages are rare.

"Lots of marriages start as a matter of convenience, but then the spouses grow closer over time."

“Mmhm.”

“So I was hoping you and I could start over from a ‘mere marriage of convenience,’” Mr. Fisalis said with unusual eloquence, but minus his usual gentle smile. He was staring earnestly at me, trembling just a little, and I felt as though I were teetering on the edge of a cliff... but surely, that was just my imagination.

First, we deleted the ‘show wife’ clause from our contract. Then we moved on to the next important clause: my family’s debt. It had already been paid off, either by Mr. Fisalis directly or by his family.

“What of the debt you took over for my family? You only paid it in exchange for me becoming your show wife.” I was prepared for him to possibly respond by saying I could pay him back for the rest of my life.

“Hmm, in that case, why not think of it as betrothal money? I gave it to your family under that pretense anyway, and I don’t regret paying it if it means I can have you,” he answered casually. “I hope you can accept this, er, token of my gratitude.”

That amount of money is not just a ‘token!’

I succumbed to Mr. Fisalis’ insistence that we renew the contract rather than cancel it, even though it was what historians might call an ‘unequal treaty,’ one which had benefited only me up until that point.

Besides, if we cancel the contract, I’d have to go back home and leave behind all the servants here that I’ve worked so hard to befriend. The thought came as something of a surprise; I’d been at the manor for just under six months, but had already grown very attached to it and everyone there.

I was left with only one choice: I agreed to renew the contract.

“Oh, thank heavens!” Mr. Fisalis said in response, smiling at me so handsomely that it made me smile, too. “Alright. Starting over, then—from now on, I’ll live here,” he continued.

Good idea... that would be the normal thing to do, but then again, I guess it would be unusual for him. I never imagined we’d have to rewrite a contract that was so strange to start with!

“Of course,” I confirmed.

“I’ll sleep in my old bedroom, just like I’ve been doing.”

So, we’re not going to be sharing a room, I see. Having to share a room so suddenly would be too much for me, so I have no complaints.

“Of course.”

“I’ll send my belongings over here once I’m done straightening up the cottage. Please continue to use the same bedroom you’ve been sleeping in.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome to continue to do as you please, too,

as per the original contract, but..." he hesitated.

"...but?" I tilted my head when he cut himself off, all the while staring right at me.

What's with the nervous pause?

He'd been avoiding looking at me until now, and now that he was, he looked serious, his expression stiff.

"You will be strictly forbidden from having any lovers aside from me."

He'd added a non-competition clause to the contract.

It was supposed to be a so-called contractual marriage—a marriage that was mutually beneficial—right? With zero mention of falling in love with each other, too... a completely loveless marriage, right? So what's the deal with him putting a ban on romance that doesn't involve him!? I have no choice but to fall in love with him then?

This is all happening so fast.

...can someone please explain what's going on!?

Side Stories: How This All Came to Be

1. The Femme Fatale

“Cercis, that’s the most talked-about dancing girl in the capital!”

I was at a tavern on the outskirts of town, having been invited by my friends from the Order when she was there.

The air in the tavern was so thick from the heat of all the men crammed inside and drinking like fish that I felt as though I might choke. I followed the gazes of a group of seedy-looking fellows in a particularly stagnant area of the tavern until my eyes landed on the woman in question. She looked like some kind of exotic flower, drawing in everyone who watched her as she elegantly danced across the stage—if you could even call it a stage. It was raised only a single step above the grimy floor.

Her long, jet black hair whirled around her like the Milky Way undulating through the night sky, and she moved her body to the rhythm like some sort of goddess. Her bewitching smile pierced through me like an arrow.

To call such a majestic creature a mere ‘dancing girl’ was to do her a disservice, for she was nothing short of a queen.

I was no saint. As the heir to a duchy, I had enjoyed many a fling with women drawn to my looks, my body, my status, and my wealth. Never had I been with someone like her, though.

In other words, it was an unexpected attraction.

We had secured seats right in front of the stage, and I was drinking with my friends, but all the while I was unable to take my eyes off of her. What’s more, she gazed back at me as she danced on, a bold grin spread across her face.

When her dance ended, she followed us to our table amid a shower of wrapped coins and despite letting us pour her a drink, she arrogantly failed to return the favor—just as I anticipated she might. On top of that, when we tried to talk to her, her eyes wandered around the room and her replies consisted only of uninterested “hmm”s and “oh”s.

I wasn’t accustomed to behavior like that—the feelings of rapture I’d been experiencing moments earlier vanished, and I grew annoyed.

“Listen, Calendula. The boys and I don’t care how ya treat us, but

this gentleman here... he's the heir to a duchy, and loaded at that. You hear me? He's gonna be the next duke, so show him a li'l more respect!" my very intoxicated friend said with a smile, clapping me on the shoulder.

"Hair to a dooky? I don't have a clue what you're talking about, ah ha ha ha." She loudly laughed off her ignorance before taking another swig of her drink.

Is she serious?

My earlier annoyance was brushed aside in favor of wide-eyed amazement.

'Heir to a wealthy duchy' is normally my most appealing feature. It's a status so desirable that it piques any lady's interest.

My posture stiffened at the offense. I was taken aback by how easily and heartily she laughed at me.

My colleague cast a sidelong glance at me and said, "No, no. He's going to inherit a dukedom. It's an impressive title for sure, but have you seen his face? The heavens really spent a little extra time on this bastard, huh?" all the while pretending to cry bitterly. The woman took a fleeting glance at me and then turned back to my colleague.

"His face is certainly worth a look, but is that all he's got?" She punctuated her question with a huff.

I had been staring at her in astonishment, but that left me positively rigid.

What does she mean by my 'face is worth a look?' Everyone always falls over themselves to compliment me on it. I get nothing but compliments, flowery words of praise... 'he's so handsome,' 'he's just perfect.' My looks and my title are my two most defining features.

I was so shocked I felt as though I'd been bludgeoned about the head.

The girls who flocked around me up until then, to put it frankly, only saw my outward appearance, never who I was on the inside. I suppose that my looks and my bearing were so overwhelming that they never actually saw *me*.

The isolation of feeling like one's actual personhood was invisible, the crushing pressure of my future dukedom... I was tired of both.

I had given up. I couldn't escape them, no matter how hard I tried.

As a result, I couldn't help but be drawn to this woman who roared in laughter at both of them.

Could she be seeing the real me?

For a split second, I wondered if I was destined to meet her.

I was dying for her to turn around and look at me.

Just as I had with the other girls, I gave her dresses, jewels,

flowers, and the most popular and delectable sweets... every possible thing a girl could ever want.

I had been courting her for a few months when she finally said, "I'm a flighty butterfly, you know. Who knows how long I'll stay here. Are you alright with that?" When she finally accepted me with that bewitching smile on her face, I was so overjoyed that I thanked even gods I didn't believe in.

But she and I were the only ones who were happy about it.

Not just my family, but even my friends objected to my keeping company with her, telling me "a fling won't be a problem, but don't let it turn into something serious."

The culture of our kingdom wasn't particular when it came to class. We had nobles who were married to commoners—well-to-do ones, of course, or merchants.

All the same, I couldn't think of any *dukes* who were married to commoners.

I grew increasingly stubborn, though, in spite of the objections flying around us. She probably felt the same way.

We were together for six years.

Calendula was a puzzle. She herself did not know who her parents were or where she was born. Her earliest memory was being found by a traveling troupe of performers.

It would have been impossible for a woman like her, with so many missing pieces in her past, to be accepted by my parents and peers. My parents would unabashedly frown whenever I left to go and visit her. And although the butler and head personal maid's polite expressions never faltered, I could tell they weren't happy about it, either.

Then, after I turned twenty, I succeeded the peerage from my father and officially inherited the title of Duke Fisalis.

Since my work in the Chivalric Order kept me so busy, I wasn't able to attend to the management of my territory, so I told my father that I wanted to delay my succession.

"Hmm, I wouldn't mind relaxing with your mother in the countryside. I'll manage the territory until things settle down for you. What do you say?" he asked. And so, after relinquishing the rank of duke to me, he promptly moved to a villa on our territory with my dear mother.

Although I was shocked at my own ability to sweet-talk my father into shouldering the management of our land, this meant I then had the good fortune to be able to do as I pleased, so I decided to have Calendula come live at the manor.

She had been living in a luxury hotel up until then, but if we wanted to be together, it would be better that she moved out.

At first, we tried to make the master suite in the manor our own, but Rohtas stopped us.

“That room is to be saved for you and your legal, *socially-approved* wife.”

We did not let that stop us, and decided to move on to a guest room. But there we were blocked by a group of personal maids led by Dahlia, who told us, “These rooms must be available for when guests visit.”

The servants clearly aren’t pleased, and I’m concerned that Calendula will be uncomfortable when I’m away if we live here.

As I considered other options, a cottage at the edge of the garden came to mind.

It was a small building modeled after a country house, and would provide a nice change of scenery; it had sometimes served as my hideaway when mother and father fought. And since the cottage was not visible from the main house, the two of us could go about our lives without offending anyone.

We’ll only need two or three servants, probably.

There was no sense in putting it off further, so I gave the order to prepare for Calendula to move into the cottage.

Rohtas, who typically wore a straight face, was visibly upset when I told him, but I pretended not to see.

2. The Girl in My Memories

“What about this one? She has a lovely face and a nice figure, and I hear she’s a fan of yours,” my father said as he stiffly handed me a framed portrait.

My father had shown up completely out of the blue, with no advance notice. I only came to the study because a servant told me that someone had something important to discuss with me, but... for heaven’s sake, not this again.

I took the picture of the young woman without a word; she was indeed lovely.

She has a good figure, too.

But the only one I want to be with is Calendula—Callie—not some other girl.

Father had been incessantly bringing me portraits of eligible young ladies. Without fail, they were all women from good families whom I had met at a soiree or some other function. They were mere nouveau riche merchants, though, so I didn’t pay them much attention from the moment we met. I was fed up with women clamoring for my looks and my status, so father’s choices only backfired.

Father babbled on about what a nice girl she was as I blandly

glanced over the portrait, but I let every last word in one ear and out the other. I was well-versed in ignoring my parents by that point.

Father watched me in silence for a time as I just stared at the painting. "Why can't you be reasonable and just settle down?" he finally said. "You're already the head of the family. Not to mention there's the matter of producing an heir." He sighed and slouched back in his chair, at his wit's end.

His message was clear: don't let yourself become infatuated with a woman of dubious character.

Moreover, since I didn't have any siblings, it was imperative that I produce an heir. There was no escaping that.

In that case, could I marry someone who everyone finds acceptable, have an heir, and then go right back to seeing Callie? Married nobles who keep lovers are a dime a dozen, after all.

...then again, my own parents still act like newlyweds even after all these years.

I suppose it doesn't matter either way.

Realizing that I had found a loophole for Callie and I, my mood did an about-face, going from apathy to brimming with energy.

"I'll do as you wish, Father. However, I will search for a bride on my own. This way, you can give your undivided attention to the management of the territory," I told him with a smile.

I returned to my room, mulling over what sort of woman would be best.

Someone of not too high or low status... someone humble would be good.

A noble would hate being married and make my life harder, so they're out of the question. I wouldn't be able to forgive someone if they went after Callie out of jealousy.

I wouldn't mind if her looks were only second rate.

No, she'd have to be seen with me, so an ugly woman would simply make me look bad.

Which means the most important thing will have to be a complete lack of interest in me.

I'd be in a world of trouble if she was in love with me, heh.

But like hell I'd tie myself to a... a show wife who wouldn't so much as look at me.

Just going over these requirements makes me doubt there even is a woman who fulfills all of them, I told myself, feeling overwhelmed.

I'll probably have to compromise in some respect.

The very first thing I did was remove Verbena Argenteia from my list.

Her family was on friendly terms with mine, so I had played with

the Argenteia children frequently as a child and had gotten to know the eldest daughter, Verbena, quite well.

At first glance, the fact that we were close friends seemed to be a promising sign, but she had grown arrogant as she climbed the social ladder—which in turn, would damage my own reputation, thus ending my social life.

Still more importantly, she wouldn't be able to stand Callie's presence.

In short, she was removed so quickly because she did not meet any of my criteria.

I tried to come up with other people, but could not think of any who would be suitable. I let myself sink further into the sofa and kept on trying.

I closed my eyes and leafed through the memories of the many parties I had attended. No matter the party, I was constantly receiving flirty looks from women, so thinking back to those events turned out to be rather unpleasant.

But then a certain figure appeared from the depths of my mind, like a revelation.

I remembered that particular evening party exactly; that girl did not look at me even once, too shy to even join in conversation with anyone at all.

Absolutely nothing about her stood out. She was modest without seeming timid, and appeared to enjoy watching everyone else.

Of all the women I saw there, young and old, that girl had a special aura.

She really had no reason to be so modest.

Her austere, matronly olive-hued dress could be summed up as 'plain.' The cut was so conservative that I wondered if she was self-conscious about her figure.

She looked nothing like the other young women around her, and yet, my eyes landed on her.

Having said that, she wasn't homely at all; in fact, upon closer inspection, she had quite a well-proportioned face. It was just that her plain dress and simple makeup made her *seem* unsophisticated. Her utter plainness piqued my curiosity.

"Who is that girl?" I'd asked my childhood friend and the second son of the Argenteia family, Celosia, who stood nearby. I'd indicated the girl in question with a glance. He followed my gaze, taking a moment to recall.

"Hm? ...oh, that's Earl Euphorbia's daughter, Miss Viola. Today's her formal debut," he had informed me.

Celosia's always in the know from his work as a civil servant in the palace. Civil servants are required to memorize a list of the nobility, which

in this instance, actually comes in handy.

"So this is your first time seeing her?"

"Oh, do you like her?" I inquired.

"No. I just thought she seemed kind of odd, is all," Celosia replied, grinning at me. I could tell he was sincere in not being particularly interested in her, since he did not blush.

You're just as curious about her as I am.

Our night had ended without any further developments, but now, my curiosity had been aroused once more.

Her social status was perfect, being the daughter of an earl. I didn't know what her temperament was like, but based on how plain and inconspicuous she appeared, I didn't get the sense that she was arrogant. On the contrary, she had observed her surroundings with clever eyes, and impressed me as intelligent.

And most important of all, she was not attracted to me.

That part was invaluable.

Now that I think of it, I've heard rumors that the Euphorbia family has had financial troubles.

"Hmm. This could be worth looking into," I muttered absentmindedly.

"...so that's why I need to get married." I explained the general circumstances to Callie when I returned to the cottage. I couldn't avoid the subject and risk her misunderstanding the situation. Besides, I'm only getting married so she and I can stay together.

She examined her nails as I talked, before finally looking at me when I finished.

"Oh, I see," she said simply, giving me a sweet smile.

This woman who fawned over me, but was not easily seduced, never ceased to fascinate me, and I only pursued her harder.

Although I was relieved by her brief response, it also made me feel a bit sad.

"But she'd be just for show—my wife I mean—so there's no need for you to worry, Callie. This is just so we can stay together like this," I carefully explained, taking her beautiful hand, one that no longer had to bear the toils of vagrancy.

"Mmm, that's right," she answered briefly once more, and just smiled.

3. The Unexpected

When I inquired into the Euphorbia family, I found that their financial situation was just as the rumors had suggested.

Due to a famine, they had taken on a large debt and were now living on a reduced household budget with minimal socializing. As far as Miss Viola was concerned, she hadn't been seen at any events since, and as a result I was not able to get much information on her.

Having no other option, I decided to negotiate directly.

It would be a contractual marriage in exchange for taking on their massive debt. So, not even a marriage of convenience, per se.

"Alright. I'll do anything if you promise to pay off our debt." Viola didn't sulk, or act surprised, but simply answered calmly.

She readily agreed to even the more peculiar clauses in the contract that regular girls would have scoffed at.

I didn't expect her to agree this easily!

Her complete lack of hesitation caught me totally by surprise.

She didn't so much as blush when I flashed an indulgent smile that I knew no one could resist, and instead her eyes only became an icy blue.

...so at least I knew for sure that she wasn't attracted to me! She wasn't able to hide when expression shifted from a forced smile to one of discomfort, however.

Even so, never have I ever been so utterly ignored before!

I had no room to complain about it, though.

For some reason, I got a hazy, uncertain feeling that I couldn't shake... but for the time being, I had successfully acquired the perfect show wife, insofar as I couldn't find a better one.

I promptly wrote a letter to my parents back in the territory.

'I have found someone I am going to marry. She is the oldest daughter of the Euphorbia family, Miss Viola,' I wrote, keeping it brief.

If Rohtas happened to reproachfully glare at the letter, I certainly did not notice.

Shortly after our engagement was finalized, the situation with the country on our southern border turned sour, and those of us in the military were unexpectedly sent to engage them. Although my wedding ended up being repeatedly delayed, I returned home from the south no worse for wear after a year of campaigning.

When it was time for the wedding, I took on all the preparations so that the Euphorbia family was not further burdened. It was the least I could do, after making them wait a whole year.

I had brought a personal maid with me to help Viola with the day's preparations, and she went above and beyond my wildest expectations. Refined makeup can enhance one's innate elegance, and the maid certainly brought out every bit of Viola's considerable charm.

Viola's abundant and rather neglected strawberry blonde hair had

been brushed smooth and glittered as if some sort of shimmering gel had been applied to it. She wore the front part of her hair in a breezy half-up style, leaving the hair in the back gently cascading over her shoulders.

She had me captivated. I couldn't believe this was that inelegant girl from earlier!

It was impossible for anyone to compare her unfavorably to me when she stood by my side looking like *that*—indeed, I wonder if she didn't, in fact, shine even brighter.

“All this doesn't really suit me, does it?” she asked, worriedly looking down at her dress. She had no idea that only moments before I had been rendered speechless at the sight of her.

It was impossible for me to tell her how she had enchanted me—*she's supposed to be only your show wife, after all*, I told myself—so I smiled and said, “No, you look wonderful,” before reaching out to escort her to the sanctuary.

I was never a devout believer, so despite my vows being nothing but a pack of lies, my conscience remained perfectly clear.

Pretending to be a loving couple at the reception wore me out, but this was all so Callie and I could live together.

By my side throughout the evening as I grinned and bore it was Viola, who seemed all too happy to go around and introduce herself, absolutely unbothered.

Her performance astounded me. I never would have guessed she was so skilled at social etiquette, although I suppose she probably felt otherwise on the inside.

Never one to back down from a challenge, though, some burning desire to win ignited within me. To my surprise, I ended up pushing myself to outplay her in my happy husband role.

...what on earth did I hope to win, though?

Once I made it through the reception, I wanted to go straight home to Callie, so I left before Viola did and hurried to the cottage without even bothering to change out of my formal wear.

“I'm back, Callie!”

“My, you're back early. I didn't think you'd be home at all tonight,” she responded. Although her answer was blunt, it seemed as though she had stayed awake to wait for me, although she did so while drinking on the living room sofa.

I had been feeling as though her interest in me had been fading, but her casual behavior that night somehow made me so happy that I embraced her without a word.

“What's this?” she chuckled. “You're very affectionate, tonight,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she stroked my hair.

Callie was the only one who would do that for me, and it felt...

nice.

Even Mother never coddled me like that.

The day after the wedding, I received word that yet another skirmish had broken out in the country to the south, so my unit was sent out in a hurry. They said to expect it to take a week.

I informed Rohtas, but I don't think I told Viola. I figured Rohtas would tell her. The only thing on my mind was that I wouldn't see Callie for a week.

I'll have to come home early and spend some quality time with her.

The skirmish with our neighbor to the south was over quickly, and the earlier estimate was right—I was back home in the capital in a week. Although I was impatient to get home to Callie after being away from her for so long, I could not skip my daily briefing with Rohtas, so I bit the bullet and stopped at the main house first.

I had sent prior notice, so he was already waiting for me in the entryway.

“Did anything happen while I was away?”

“Not a thing, Master. It is good to see you have returned home safely.”

“Mm.”

This was the typical conversation with Rohtas, so it didn't indicate anything out of the ordinary. Assuming nothing of note had happened nor did anything require my immediate attention, I would normally have left for the cottage, but this time I stayed to ask about my new show wife. “How has Viola been doing?”

“Madam is doing well. She has a lovely personality and is already close with the servants.”

“I see.”

I would have had to think of a plan B if she hadn't been able to adapt to living as a duchess. I was relieved that my fear proved unfounded.

I knew the servants didn't get along with Callie, but they seemed to get on with Viola just fine. The servants at the cottage interacted with Callie like they were machines, with no emotion at all.

“Madam is such a lovely person. You must be quite taken by her, Master... now, you can go back to the old you.”

“What do you mean? I've always been me. Or rather, maybe the way I am now *is* the real me. I'm able to be myself because Callie's here with me.”

Rohtas gave me a meaningful look.

I saw it directly, and just when it seemed like he was actually glaring at me, a clear voice echoed down from the second floor:

“Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis.”

Scurrying down the stairs was the girl in question—Viola.

My attention turned to her as if drawn in by her voice—she hadn't come to greet me wearing any of the fancy gowns she had been provided; instead she wore a tidy dress intended for relaxing indoors.

The tension in the air lifted as soon as she appeared.

Oh, that dress suits her perfectly, much more so than those gowns, I thought to myself. To no surprise, Callie was the one who came to mind when I thought of luxury gowns. *She certainly looks great in those.*

Argh, she's the one I want to be seeing right now, not Viola.

I could only think of Callie back at the cottage and all but ignored Viola, even though she was right in front of me.

Wanting nothing more than to leave, I said, "I'm home. I do hope you've been well. I must be going now." It was cold of me, but that was all I said before I impatiently hurried away to the cottage.

4. Attraction

I took time off from work for the two days immediately following the campaign.

It was unlikely that I'd be able to rekindle a spark in Callie, so to speak, in just two days, but it had been quite some time since I'd been sent on a campaign that long, so I forced myself to stay home. I figured it was better late than never. The weather was wonderful. The cottage was surrounded by trees that gave the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world; it was so quiet there, you'd never think you were in the center of the capital.

The only thing we could hear was the tranquil chirping of the birds.

We spent the day lounging on the sofa by our favorite pond. I felt the weariness from a week on the battlefield fade away when I shut my eyes and began to relax as her elegant hands carded through my hair. I dozed with my head on Callie's lap as we sprawled on the sofa atop the deck overlooking the pond.

Neither Viola, nor any of the servants, and especially not my parents, came by to bother us.

This is the way everyday ought to be, I thought to myself, content. But change came slowly.

"Oh, I think this dish is from Lesace," Callie said one evening as we ate our customary dinner in the cottage together.

I wanted to be able to unwind and talk about my day with her, so we simply had the food brought to us from the main house.

"From the Lesace region?" I hadn't ever been there, much less eaten its cuisine. I looked at Callie's plate.

It just looked like one of the usual main dishes—meat with a vegetable-based sauce on top—but Callie had traveled to many places

before she came to the royal capital, so she had a broader knowledge of these sorts of things.

That was surely why she had recognized it. She confirmed it after taking just one bite. “I was right. The use of this aromatic herb is unique to that region.”

I copied her, having a bite as well, but didn’t notice anything special.

“Our lunch was Lesaçois, too. I guess you wouldn’t be able to tell, but we’ve been eating food from a different region every day as of late.” Callie smiled in delight, as if it reminded her of wherever ‘home’ was for her.

It wasn’t just the food that had changed.

Decorative flowers began to show up in our living room. Up until then, there hadn’t been any decorations around, because Callie never mentioned wanting any, but I started to notice decorations, such as tastefully arranged flowers, in places that had been previously empty.

Callie loved extravagance, so perhaps it was because they were unassuming varieties, the kind one might pick in a meadow, that she ignored them. I, however, wanted to find out why they suddenly started to appear in the cottage, so I asked one of the maids who waited on us, “Why do we have flowers here now?”

“Madam has been arranging the rooms in the manor, so she took the liberty of decorating a little here, too,” she replied. This maid usually gave only indifferent, expressionless answers, but when she mentioned ‘Madam,’ I was surprised to see her expression soften ever so slightly.

Wow, so servants do have feelings!

The maids always finished their work without so much as a smile, nor any more concern that was absolutely necessary, but they smiled for Viola even though she only just got here!?

I mentally cocked my head in confusion.

One day, as the slight changes continued to occur:

I sent a letter to my parents—still living a life of quiet relaxation in the territory—asking them to come and visit.

I expected that they might want to perform some reconnaissance to see if our married life was progressing well.

I told them that I had broken things off with Callie. I arranged a backstory with Rohtas beforehand, as well, so I was confident he wouldn’t reveal the truth, but I needed Viola’s cooperation, too. I briefed her during one of our routine conversations in the entryway when I returned home from work.

I thought it would look bad if we slept in different bedrooms, so after careful consideration I told her, “They’ll stay in the guest room. I

suppose I'll have to stay in the master bedroom..."

"Right. I'll bring up a cot for the master bedroom, then. I'll sleep there. Please help yourself to the bed," she eloquently replied.

She stared at me in puzzlement when I reflexively kept my eyes on her face for too long. But I was embarrassed to force a woman to give up her bed for me, to say nothing of then making her sleep on a cot, so I tried to refuse.

"But as a man of honor, I could never forgive myself for allowing a lady to give up her bed for me. I will take the cot..."

But she got the wrong impression, and I only succeeded in making myself appear too overbearing. "Oh, no, it's no trouble at all; please, go ahead! Oh, would you like me to change the sheets to some fresh ones? Or I could bring your pillow over from the cottage?"

Had she been any other girl, she would have claimed her own bed at the start and pointed me to the cot or the sofa. But Viola wasn't like any other girl.

She never ceased to amaze me with how meaningless the concept of an 'ordinary girl' seemed to be with her.

When I offhandedly told Callie as much, she curtly brushed it off with a "humph."

On the days my parents visited, I reluctantly stayed away from her.

"It's only for two days. I'm sure you'll get by without me just fine," I assured her.

"I'm sure I will."

"I'll come right back here as soon as they leave."

"Mm, okay," she mumbled back coldly.

Compared to me, Callie seemed to be in a bad mood at the thought of us being apart—her stern eyes devoid of her usual smile that was like a gentle embrace.

She wouldn't even look at me.

She must be unhappy that I'll be spending time with Viola.

Even though Viola's my show wife, we don't have any sort of mutual feelings for each other... Does Callie not know that she's the one who holds my heart? There's no need for hard feelings, I thought to myself, somewhat annoyed. But since I wanted Callie to be in a good mood, I tried to soothe and humor her until my personal maid came to notify me of my parents' arrival.

Although I stopped by the entrance in the main house every day, it wasn't as if I actually took much notice of what was there. I was in too much of a hurry to get back to the cottage.

Four years had gone by since I'd started living with Callie. I had not set foot in the main house at all during that time. Especially not since I married Viola. So when I finally visited the manor again... it

was completely different.

My mother's voice drew my attention to beautiful flowers arranged in a large vase. We had marble statues and valuable porcelain ornaments before, but we had never decorated with flowers.

I never noticed the flowers until now, I thought to myself yet again as I listened to my mother and Viola talk.

"My word! You can actually talk with Bellis!?"

"Mmhhh, he's a really nice guy," Viola said without hesitation.

She can actually talk with that moody gardener!?

As I listened more to their conversation, I noticed that in spite of the praise coming from both my mother and my father, Viola only magnanimously replied, "I'm glad you think so! I'm sure Bellis would be happy, too," with a pleased smile.

...hey, now. That's not fair, I thought irritably.

She never smiled at me like that.

We had food from the Rheine region for lunch. I was wondering what was going on with the food as of late, so I brought it up with Viola, assuming she would know because she was familiar with the goings-on in the main house.

"Er, um, well... The cooks have been teaching me things. The apprentice cooks have come here from all over, and whatnot," she answered simply.

She even knows what's going on in the kitchen! I'm pretty sure there's some womanizing man with an accent down there...

The mere thought of that handsy chef had me in a bad mood yet again.

After we finished lunch, we moved to the salon; the room had been completely redesigned for a more relaxed, rustic look, without feeling out-of-place in the elegant manor.

All I could do at that point was just be stunned.

The room had been brought back to life; the dusty, outdated furniture was gone. The manor had previously felt stiff and cold—while I was there, I could only ever feel the pressure of my title—but now, there were flowers scattered about the place that made it feel warm.

The servants didn't look so robotic when they passed me by, either—they were working energetically and seemed happy.

Could all this be Viola's doing...?

I turned around to face Viola, standing just behind me, and was met with a pair of sapphire blue eyes.

For some reason, it felt just like when we first met.

Seeing Viola up close for the first time that day, she had seemed so intelligent. I couldn't pinpoint when, but that drab girl from the party had transformed into a sophisticated lady, too.

What was it I was seeing for the first time? I saw her nearly everyday, after all.

It was the sense of responsibility that came with fully understanding her role and her unwillingness to let her so-called husband sully her mood.

Her ability to befriend all the servants and to fashion this enormous manor into her own style.

How she didn't see me as anyone special.

That bland girl I saw at the party was nowhere to be found. The clever spark in her eye had always been there, but before I knew it, that spark had sprouted wings like a butterfly. Her bright, joyful eyes pulled me in, I couldn't look away.

...oh, maybe what I've found is actually a diamond in the rough.

Bonus Short Story

Rainy Day Companion

It was raining that day in Flür.

The long rainy season always made me depressed. But you'd feel that way too if you were up to your neck in training! Rainy days meant dance lessons, and martial arts practice, and fencing practice...

A gloomy mood had been hanging over me since I'd looked out the window that morning.

"I want to try just taking it easy sometimes."

"You're always taking it easy."

"Am not. I'm always running around cleaning, doing laundry, and gardening."

"I do believe you said that you preferred physical activity to embroidery and calligraphy."

"...touché."

"I mean, it'd be nice to just relax with a book or something, once in a while!"

I couldn't argue with Dahlia's logic.

"That probably would be lovely, yes. You just haven't had the time for that recently."

"Exactly!"

Mr. Fisalis has filled the cottage with books, but he never reads those, either.

What a waste.

"That reminds me, a new book was supposed to have arrived. It was only just released recently, but it's really popular, I hear. I'm not sure if it's in line with your tastes, though, Madam..."

Books are added as needed to the library in the main house. On one such occasion, a book that I might like was added to the shelf in the cottage.

"Oh, not at all, I'll read anything! A trendy romance novel? That sounds interesting."

I was mature for my age, so I was not interested in real-life romance, but reading about it in a book was fun. That is to say, romance novels are essentially fantasy.

"I'm pleased to hear it. It has already been placed on the shelves in the cottage, so you may read it at any time."

"That's where I'm headed, then!"

“Huh? Madam? What about your fencing practice!?”

“Save it for the next rainy day!”

Cut to me fleeing for my life from a grueling fencing lesson. I booked it to the cottage, leaving Dahlia in shock behind me.

I have to hurry! Before Rohtas catches me!

I quickly found the title Dahlia had mentioned.

I'll spend today with this book.

I sprawled out on my bed, set myself to Couch Potato Mode, and started reading.

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, there was a man from a well-to-do family and a poor woman.

The woman entered into a contractual marriage with the well-to-do man.

One might assume the woman married him for his money, but in truth, the man already had a lover.

“Hm?”

Even so, the admirable woman made friends with the servants, and slowly grew accustomed to the grand estate.

The wealthy man developed feelings for the woman.

Although he created a fake marriage so he could continue to live with his lover undisturbed, the man found the penniless woman so charming that he left his paramour.

“Hmm?”

There were many twists and turns along the way, but they eventually came to understand their feelings, and fell so deeply in love with each other that no one could ever come between them. The end.

“Hmmmm!?”

I finished the book and tossed and turned on the bed.

This is just like our story! It's too freaky to just be a coincidence...!

As I lay on my bed, questioning reality, I was startled when someone opened my door.

“Vi? Are you still reading it... Vi! What's wrong!?” It was Mr. Fisalis, home from work. I didn't mind that he came to say hello, but he nearly scared my socks off.

“Welcome home! Sorry, I was completely absorbed in reading. Would you believe—” I explained why I was in such a state on my bed when he came in.

“—that certainly does sound like us...”

“What a coincidence! It's giving me chills.”

“I don't think our love story is special enough to be made into a book, though.”

“Special?”

“Yes.”

Indeed, I was sure that the life I led was in no way connected to

romance or a love story. But...

Little did I know, I was a protagonist!



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by Tsuredurebana

Translated by Mattias Hirsch
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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